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NOVEMBER, 1959 Vol. 5, No. 6

NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

MASQUERADE FOR MURDER
BRETT HALLIDAY 4

THREE COMPLETE NOVELETS

DATE WITH A CORONER
FLOYD WALLACE 32

DEATH OF A LIGHT-HEARTED LADY
RUTH MALONE 54

FURY IN THE FOG
RICHARD MATHIESON 84

SHORT STORIES

THE TOFF AND THE UNKNOWN VICTIM
JOHN CREASEY 72

PRIZE STORY CONTEST INTRODUCTION
BRETT HALLIDAY 105

THE FOOTSTEPS OF MURDER
MARY LINN MITCHELL 108

YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO PRAY
GRADY MULLIS 116

THE PATSY
JIM HALLMAN 128

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Masquerade for Murder

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET

by BRETT HALLIDAY

THE LETTERING on the front doors of the sedan read: SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT, *Orleans County, La.* The car was headed north and had just reached the outskirts of New Orleans.

Three men were in the car. The fat deputy in the rear seat had his left wrist handcuffed to a lean, hollow-cheeked man with smoldering gray eyes. The deputy driving the car kept one eye on the road, the other on the rear-view mirror, which was focused so that it reflected the image of the hollow-cheeked man instead of the rear window.

The prisoner said to his fat seat companion, "How about unlocking these cuffs until we get to the hospital?"

The fat man merely shook his head.

"You guys are being awfully careful," the prisoner said contemptuously. "Think I'd try to jump from a moving car?"

The driver said, "You might. You're crazy enough to try anything."

The hollow-cheeked man stiffened. "Don't call me that," he said in a flat voice.

"Why not?" the driver inquired. "You didn't object to being called crazy during the trial."

© 1959, by Brett Halliday

An insane killer, a diffident semi-client, and a blonde in a halter! No wonder Mike had to play it warily.

The fat deputy in back said, "You ought to be glad you're nuts. If you weren't, you'd be heading for the hot seat instead of to the mental hospital."

The prisoner's eyes blazed briefly before he hooded them over. Then he relaxed against the back of the seat in feigned indifference. "Have your fun," he said. "Some day I'll get out and look you two up."

The fat man said dryly, "He's adding us to his list now, George. How many's that make he's going to kill?"

"I lost track," the driver said. "The judge, the prosecuting attorney, the jurors, a couple of cops and that reporter. He's going to be a busy little bee, if he ever does get out."

The prisoner's lips curled in a bleak smile. His left hand dropped to his lap, and his thumb hooked inside his belt to caress a thin strip of metal concealed beneath it and supported by two of his trouser loops. Originally the strip of metal had been a spoon handle. Painstaking hours of honing it against the stone sill of his cell window had converted it into a razor-edged blade with a point tapering to needle sharpness.

When the fat man glanced sidewise at him, the prisoner's hand raised and casually dipped into his inside breast pocket for a cigarette. The deputy flicked a lighter aflame for him.

They were well out of town now, and the houses were few and widely separated, for the land on either side of the road was swampy. After two drags on his cigarette, the prisoner flipped it out the window and dropped his hand to his lap again. At that moment the driver slowed for a stop intersection with another highway ahead.

The thin blade glittered as it flashed upward and sank into the fat deputy's heart. He emitted a surprised grunt and pitched forward, his head striking the back of the front seat.

The driver had just braked the car to a full stop at the intersection. He had not caught the flash of the blade in the rear-view mirror, but he felt the jar of his partner's head striking the seat back behind him. He twisted his head over his shoulder.

The blade flashed out again. A thin red streak appeared across the driver's throat. His head still twisted over his shoulder, he gaped backward without understanding as the streak slowly opened like a wide second mouth and blood began to gush from it. His head swiveled forward and his hands left the wheel. He made a gurgling noise, and fell sideways with the impetus of a leaden weight.

Two cars passed from the opposite direction while the hollow-cheeked man was fishing the hand-

cuff key from the fat deputy's pocket and unlocking the cuffs. Neither driver gave the sheriff's department car more than a casual glance. No cars came from the other direction until after the lean man had climbed into the front seat, had driven a hundred feet beyond the intersection and had pulled the car over on the shoulder. A slight breeze had arisen, ruffling the killer's hair.

The car was barely off the road when a whole line of traffic came from behind. Neither slain deputy could be seen from the passing cars, as the man in back had tumbled to the floor and the one in front had only his head resting on the seat. The lean man patiently waited until no cars were in sight from either direction. Then he rounded the car and dragged both dead men out.

Wiping his thin blade on the coat of the fat man, he replaced it under his belt. He thrust both deputies' guns into coat pockets. Stripping the bills from their wallets, he pocketed the currency and tossed the wallets into the water-filled ditch alongside the road. Then, one at a time, and with the muscular ease of an extremely strong man, he heaved the bodies into the ditch.

The muddy water was only about two feet deep, and though both bodies sank to the bottom, the skirts of their coats billowed upward to float on top. But even as the lean man watched, the cloth became water-soaked and sank.

When the lean man climbed back into the car, he carefully avoided the bloodstains on the front seat by squeezing as far left as he could get.

Another spurt of traffic came along from both directions, but no one paid any attention to the parked sheriff's department car. Eventually, when the road was clear both ways, the lean man made a U-turn and drove back toward New Orleans.

The sun was just beginning to set. Glancing westward, the hollow-cheeked man estimated that it would be dark in another hour. He could be to his brother's house by then, he told himself, and away again in changed clothes before anyone began to worry about the failure of the deputies and their charge to arrive at the State Mental Hospital.

Then he frowned. Could he trust Cran not to inform the police that he'd been to his home for a change of clothing? His older brother had stood by him at the trial, but that didn't mean he wasn't law-abiding and might not consider his duty to society more important than ties of blood.

Momentarily he considered making sure there would be no report of his visit to Cran, then shame-facedly rejected the thought. Only a madman would

contemplate killing his own brother.

And they were all wrong, he assured himself. The police, his defense attorney, the newspapers, the sanity commission. The law had adjudged him criminally insane, but he knew better.

He was as normal as anyone.

II

MICHAEL SHAYNE strode into his Flager Street office, jerked off his hat, mussing up his coarse red hair, and tossed it onto the hook of the clothes tree near the door.

Lucy Hamilton looked up from her typewriter beyond the low wooden railing dividing the anteroom. "Good morning, Michael," she said musically.

Crossing to the railing, the rangy detective reached across and affectionately rumpled his secretary's brown hair. "Morning angel. Anything important?"

Lucy refused to be flustered. "A telegram, Michael." She held it out to him.

The wire was from New Orleans. It read: *Arrive Miami by plane nine a.m. Monday, May fourth. Urgent I see you at once. Will be at your office at ten.* It was signed: *Crandall Reese.*

Shayne glanced at the wall calendar, which said May fourth. Then he glanced at his wrist watch, which said nine forty-five.

"Not much advance notice," he grunted. "Who the devil is Crandall Reese?"

"I called Tim Rourke at the *Daily News* to see if he knew," Lucy said. "Remember the news item a few days ago about a maniac murdering two deputies just outside of New Orleans and escaping from custody?"

The redhead frowned as he thoughtfully tugged at his left earlobe. "The guy's name was Reese, too, wasn't it? They were transporting him to the Louisiana State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. I only scanned the item, but as I remember it, he'd been convicted of the grudge murder of some druggist." He thought for a moment. "Herbert Reese. Is this Crandall Reese some relation?"

Lucy nodded. "Tim checked the back wire service copy and found mention of an older brother named Crandall. I had Tim give me a resume of the case over the phone. The *News* only published a sketchy version of it, because it wasn't of local interest, but all the details were in the wire service report. I typed up what Tim told me."

Lucy handed him two neatly typewritten sheets. Shayne carried them into his private office, sank behind his desk and looked them over.

Lucy had cut the report to bare essentials. It read:

Early in April Herbert Reese, age 34, a payroll clerk for the

Whalen Plastics Company of New Orleans, was tried and convicted in Orleans County, Louisiana, of the first-degree murder of a pharmacist named Norman Schweyer. The only apparent motive was revenge for the druggist's refusal to refund money on some patent medicine Reese claimed didn't live up to its advertisement. (During the police investigation it was fairly well established that Reese had previously killed at least two other persons for similar minor reasons. He was tried only for Schweyer's murder, however.) After the trial, and before sentencing, a sanity hearing was held. Reese was found to be a hopeless schizophrenic with a deep-seated persecution complex. (At the trial he twice went berserk and threatened to kill the judge, the prosecuting attorney, two testifying police officers and a reporter who suggested in print that he was insane.) As a result of the hearing, the court on April thirtieth committed him for an indefinite period to the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, with the stipulation that if he were ever declared sane at some future time, he could be resentenced either to prison or execution.

On last Friday, May first, Deputy Sheriffs Clay Fenner and George Mason were transporting Reese to the State Hospital in a sheriff's department car. The car never arrived, and twenty-four hours later both deputies were found dead in a drainage ditch north of New Orleans. One had been stabbed through the heart by some sharp, pointed instrument, the other had his throat cut. Both deputies' guns were missing.

Even before discovery of the bodies, the bloodstained car was found abandoned in New Orleans a block from the home of Reese's older brother, Crandall Reese. Crandall, who lives alone, reported to police that he was away from home all that evening. His rear door had been forced and some of his clothing was missing. Police theorize that Herbert Reese was the burglar and that he changed clothing at his brother's house in order to confuse his broadcast description. He is still at large.

Nothing in the wire service report suggests what Crandall Reese might want with you.

Shayne had barely finished absorbing Lucy's resume of the case when she buzzed him to announce that Crandall Reese had arrived. He told her to bring the man in.

The man Lucy escorted into the private office was in his mid-thirties, leanly built, with a thin face and clear gray eyes. The handclasp he offered the detective was firm.

Dismissing Lucy, Shayne waved his visitor to a chair and remarked, "You're lucky you caught me in, Mr. Reese. I got your wire only a few minutes ago."

"I sent it from the New Orleans airport," Reese apologized. "And these days planes are nearly as fast as telegrams. It was a last minute thought to wire you at all. At first I was just going to look up some private detective when I got here. Then I remembered reading your name in the papers and sent off a wire. Not knowing your address, I just addressed it to Michael Shayne, Miami, Florida. It's a tribute to your reputation that it was delivered at all."

The redhead merely grunted.

"I suppose you've guessed why I'm here, Mr. Shayne."

The detective shook his head. "I know who you are, but I haven't the faintest idea what you want."

Reese looked surprised, then thoughtful. "No, of course you wouldn't. I'm so upset over Herb, I'm not thinking clearly. It wasn't in the papers about Uncle Norbert."

"Who?"

"Norbert Whalen. He's our mother's brother. Also our employer, incidentally. I'm in charge of the payroll department for Whalen Plastics, and Herb was a clerk in my department. You're familiar with Herb's case?"

"Only the bare details."

"Well, you know he threatened to kill a number of people if he escaped."

The redhead nodded. "About seventeen, wasn't it?"

"Eighteen. In court he only sounded off about the judge, the prosecuting attorney, the arresting officers and a reporter he thought had slandered him. But I used to visit him in his cell. He told me the first one on his list was Uncle Norbert. It was Uncle Norbert who tipped off the police about Herb's grudge against Schweyer, you see. All the others are under heavy police guard since Herb's escape. But they don't know Uncle Norbert is on the list."

Shayne said sharply, "You never reported the threat?"

Reese flushed. "It never occurred to me that Herb could escape. There'd been so much horrible publicity, I didn't want to stir up any more."

"Didn't you report it even after he did escape?"

Reese's flush deepened. "I told you I haven't been thinking clearly. All during the weekend I've been under police interrogation, listing Herb's friends, guessing where he might hide out. I've been so upset, I never thought of the threat until last night. And the moment I did, I phoned for a plane reservation."

Shayne frowned. "What do you expect to accomplish here? I suggest you make a long-distance call

to the New Orleans police right now and arrange police protection for your uncle."

"That would be quite useless," Reese said, the trace of a bitter smile appearing on his lips, and vanishing almost instantly. "Uncle Norbert is vacationing in Miami. He has a beach cottage here. And Herb knows where it is. We've both been guests there many times."

Reese went on to inform Shayne that Norbert Whalen's beach cottage was on the very edge of Miami in the direction of Miami Beach. He offered to show Mike Shayne where it was.

Shayne studied the man broodingly. "Before we concern ourselves about the location—just what is it you want me to do for you?"

"Why, keep my brother from murdering our uncle, of course."

The detective shook his head. "I'm no professional bodyguard. If you want someone to follow your uncle around twenty-four hours a day, I'm afraid you've come to the wrong place. This is something the police can handle much more efficiently than a private detective. They can assign your uncle an around-the-clock guard. They can also set up road blocks to stop your brother before he gets here, if he's actually headed this way."

"You don't understand, Mr. Shayne. I can't possibly go to the police."

Shayne frowned at him. "Why not?"

"Nobody but me knows Herb threatened to kill Uncle Norbert. My brother is completely insane. If I set the police on him, he'd add me to his list of intended victims."

Shayne said dryly, "The police would furnish you a guard too."

Reese considered this, then shook his head. "It isn't just fear of Herb, Mr. Shayne. As mad as he is, Herb still looks up to me as his older brother. I'm the only important reality contact he has in the world of fantasy he lives in. Eventually he'll be caught, of course. And in the hospital he'll get shock treatments and psychiatric help.

"I talked to the doctors at the time of his sanity hearing. They told me that as long as he maintains contact with reality through at least one person he trusts, there's at least a bare hope for his eventual cure. I can't destroy that hope."

"Kind of a forlorn hope, isn't it?" Shayne said sardonically. "Didn't the court stipulate that if he's ever declared sane, he'll be sentenced as a criminal?"

"I'll have to take that chance. Judicial clemency is sometimes extended if absolute insanity can be proved at the time of the crime. Before you give me a definite no, will you at least drive out to Uncle

Norbert's with me, where the three of us can talk over what to do?"

The redhead tugged at his left earlobe. "I'm willing to talk to your uncle," he finally agreed. "But only to warn him against your brother and advise him to ask for police protection."

Reese stood up with a relieved expression on his face. "I knew you wouldn't let me down, Mr. Shayne. I rented a car at the airport. I can drive us out to the cottage."

But Shayne preferred to drive his own car. They left the rented one parked in front of the office.

III

IT WAS ONLY about a fifteen minute drive to Norbert Whalen's beach cottage. The place was on the edge of the city, just inside the city limits—a neat three-room frame cottage on a stretch of white-sand beach.

There was no answer when they knocked on the door. After waiting a few moments, Shayne tried the knob, found the door unlocked and walked in. Reese came in behind him.

There was a front room, kitchen and bedroom. No one was in any of them. Checking the bedroom last, Shayne noted that one of the two dresser tops contained an assortment of facial creams, powders, perfumes and other feminine beauty aids.

"Apparently has his wife with him," the detective commented.

Reese flushed. In a different voice he said, "Uncle Norbert's wife has been dead for some years."

"Oh?" Shayne said with raised eyebrows. Then he grinned. "Seems Uncle Norbert hasn't been dead."

Walking outside again, they rounded the cottage and looked down toward the beach. A beach umbrella was stuck in the sand a few yards from the water's edge, and in its shade they could see a stout man in bathing trunks lying on his back.

"That must be Uncle Norbert," Reese said.

It was a good fifty yards down to the umbrella. Part of the distance was soft sand into which their feet sank an inch or two, but as they neared the water it hardened, so that their feet made no impression.

The figure didn't stir as they neared. Reese said, "He must be asleep."

Shayne didn't answer. But his eyes narrowed as he caught the glint of metal on the prone figure's chest at a point directly over the heart. Ducking under the edge of the beach umbrella, he leaned over for a closer look.

Norbert Whalen's eyes were wide open. He was a man of about fifty-five, once powerfully-built, but now thick through the waist

and flabby through the upper arms. The glittering object Shayne had noted was the end of a thin strip of metal buried in his heart. It looked like a slim knife blade with no hilt.

Peering over the redhead's shoulder, Reese said, "My God! He's dead!"

Straightening Shayne said in a biting tone, "Thanks to your brotherly consideration. You gave your brother four days to get here by not telling the police what you knew."

Reese gave him a sticken look. "The doctors were so emphatic in insisting that keeping Herb's faith in me was important," he said faintly.

"More important than your uncle's life?" the detective said harshly.

"I—I didn't realize—" Reese avoided Shayne's accusing eyes, his voice trailing off.

Ignoring him, Shayne studied the immediate surroundings. The sand around the umbrella was too hard-packed by the daily tide to show footprints. Farther back toward the cottage it was too loose to show more than the formless imprints of where people had stepped. Angrily the redhead turned and strode back across the sand to the cottage. Reese had to trot to keep up, and the jogging, up-and-down pace made him look a little ludicrous.

A red Lincoln convertible came down the narrow lane leading to the highway just as they reached the cottage. When it stopped alongside the building, a blonde of about thirty got out. She had a round, lovely face, unmarred by any expression whatever, and an equally lovely body. She was deeply tanned, and most of her tan was in evidence, for she wore only brief yellow shorts and a slim yellow halter which exposed as much of her torso as beach regulations could overlook.

Examining Shayne from sultry eyes, she said, "Yes?"

"About what I was going to ask you," the redhead said. "Who are you?"

"Mr. Whalen's secretary. Pamela Crane. I think Mr. Whalen is down on the beach, if you're looking for him."

"We found him," Shayne said dryly. He glanced at Reese, who was staring at the woman in amazement.

"What's the matter?" The redhead asked.

Reese said, "Uncle Norbert's secretary is a woman about fifty years old named Miss Murdock."

Pamela Crane gave him a brief examination and dismissed him. With a charming smile she said to Shayne, "I'm only his vacation secretary. Who are you?"

"My name's Michael Shayne."

The woman's eyes widened. "The private detective? Of course. I've seen your picture many

times." Then she frowned. "What are you after? Norbie's not married, and neither am I."

She didn't impress Shayne as the type of woman who needed to have news broken gently. "Norbie's dead," he said bluntly. "Let's go inside."

IV

AS SHAYNE HAD expected, Pamela Crane was not easily shocked. Beside a slight widening of her eyes, she gave no indication of emotion. Quietly she led the way into the house.

Then she turned to face Shayne. "A heart attack?" she inquiried.

Shayne shook his head. "He was stabbed to death." Glancing about the room, he spotted a phone in one corner and went to it. He dialed police headquarters and asked for Chief Will Gentry.

When the chief's stolid voice said, "Hello," Shayne said in a clipped tone, "Mike Shayne, Will. I'm out at the beach cottage of a man named Norbert Whalen. He's been murdered." He gave directions for getting there.

"Be right out," Gentry said. "Any details?"

Shayne said, "Been reading in the papers about that homicidal nut Herbert Reese in New Orleans?"

"Sure," Gentry said. "Not just in the papers. We got a want, and his mug shot from New Orleans."

"Then you'd better spread the net for him. He seems to be in this area."

"Huh?" Gentry said. "You think he killed this guy?"

"The dead man was his uncle, and Reese threatened to get him. I have Reese's older brother here with me." Shayne's gaze flicked to Pamela Crane and he added. "Whalen's vacation secretary, too."

"His *what?*" Gentry asked.

"You'll understand when you meet her," Shayne said.

"Don't let anyone there leave," Gentry ordered. "I'll be on my way soon as I get out an all-points on Herbert Reese."

When the detective hung up, Pamela said, "Norbie's nephew killed him, Mr. Shayne? The crazy one?"

"Looks like it," the redhead said.

She shivered slightly. "We saw about his escape in the papers. But Norbie never expected him to show up here, so far from New Orleans." She shivered again. "Just think. He might have killed me too, if I'd been here when he arrived."

"How long have you been gone?" Shayne asked.

"All morning. I drove off about eight. Norbie was alive then. He was just getting ready to go down to the beach."

Crandall Reese said a little hesitantly, "I brought along a photograph of Herb, Mr. Shayne, if that

will help. It's only about a year old."

He drew a three-by-five photograph from his pocket and handed it to the detective. It was that of a thin, hollow-cheeked man with a remarkable resemblance to Crandall Reese. They almost might have been twins, except for a difference of expression. The man in the photograph wore a sullen, withdrawn look, and his partly hooded eyes seemed to smolder with resentment at the world.

"Looks a lot like you," Shayne commented.

"We're only a year apart," Reese said. "Almost identical height and weight."

Shayne put the picture in his pocket.

Will Gentry arrived in a car driven by a uniformed policeman and trailed by another car containing a photographer, lab man and a medic. After grunting acknowledgements to his introductions to Crandall Reese and Pamela Crane, the chief said to Shayne, "Where's the body?"

Shayne led the way down to the beach umbrella. Gentry instructed the uniformed officer to stay in the cottage with Reese and Pamela, took the photographer, lab man and medic along with him.

After looking over the scene at the beach umbrella without touching anything, the chief issued instructions to his assistants and returned to the cottage with Shayne.

"Too hot to stand out in this sun," Gentry said as they walked back toward the cottage. He mopped his brow with a large handkerchief. "Looks pretty open and shut, huh, Mike?"

Shayne shrugged. "You can never tell. Maybe somebody just took advantage of all the publicity about Reese, and rigged it to look as though Whalen's maniac nephew killed him."

Gentry frowned. "Don't start complicating a nice simple case, Mike. It's too hot to work very hard."

Despite this remark, which was self-libel anyway, because Will Gentry never shunned work regardless of the temperature, Shayne's suggestion seemed to start a train of thought in the police chief's mind. The moment they re-entered the cottage, he said to Reese, "Your uncle have any enemies aside from your brother?"

Reese looked at him in surprise. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"Shayne thinks this looks too easy. He likes me to earn my pay the hard, complicated way. Somebody could have taken advantage of all the publicity about your brother to kill your uncle and let your brother take the blame."

"That's hardly likely," Reese said reasonably. "Herb's bound to be caught eventually. If he turns up somewhere far from here, and it's established that he's never been in Miami, that plot would fall flat

on its face. No smart killer would take that chance."

Gentry looked at Reese with sudden respect. What he said was both sensible and logical. The chief turned his attention to Pamela.

"What were you to the deceased?" he asked.

"His secretary." She glanced at Reese and amended, "Just his part-time secretary. When he was on vacations."

Gentry grunted. Walking to the bedroom door, he glanced around the room and noted the feminine articles on one dresser. With an understanding nod, he turned to look at the girl again.

"You a local girl?"

"I live in Miami Beach. Mr. Whalen hired me for a week or two whenever he came down here."

"Uh-huh," Gentry said. "Account for your movements this morning?"

"I left the house at eight, when I returned Mr. Shayne and Mr. Reese were here."

"Where were you?"

"Downtown shopping."

Chief Gentry ran his eyes over her scanty attire. "In that outfit?"

The question left her unperturbed, but it made her look thoughtful. "I guess it doesn't matter now that Norbie's dead," she decided. "My regular boy friend, when Norbie wasn't around, has a cottage over on Miami Beach. Usually I ran over there when Norbie thought I was shopping."

"You were there today?"

She nodded. "All morning."

"Who's this boy friend?"

"Gerald Towne. He's in the telephone book. He lives in the cottage year round."

Gentry grunted and glanced at Shayne in tacit inquiry as to whether the redhead had any questions.

Shayne said to Reese, "Your uncle had no enemies at all aside from your brother? Everybody liked him?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. He was widely respected in New Orleans. He did a lot of philanthropic work."

"Oh?" Shayne said. "Had money, eh?"

"Whalen Plastics is a pretty big firm, and he was president. I'd guess he'll leave a million or two."

"To whom?"

Reese looked a little startled. After considering the question, he said slowly, "Why, at least part of it to me and Herb, I suppose. There aren't any other relatives. His wife is dead and my mother died two years ago. Probably he left most of his money to charity, though. He was the sort of man who would."

There was no bitterness in his tone. It was merely a matter-of-fact statement.

"You don't know the actual terms of his will?" Shayne probed.

Reese shook his head. "He never mentioned it and I never asked. I've never been much concerned about money. I have a good job and simple tastes."

Pamela said calmly, "He had me in his will for twenty-five thousand."

Everyone turned to look at her. After some silence, Reese asked, "Why?"

"Because he liked me," she said with raised brows.

Gentry glanced at Shayne. The redhead shrugged with amusement.

Shayne pulled from his pocket the three-by-five photograph Reese had given him and handed it to Will Gentry. He said, "Reese brought this along. It's about a year old. Any better than the mug shot New Orleans sent you?"

Chief Gentry examined it critically. "He looks a little more human here. Mug shots aren't very flattering."

He glanced at Reese. "You better carry plenty of identification, mister. We've got an all-points out on your brother, and you look enough like him to get yourself stopped by every police officer you meet."

Pamela walked over to the chief's side and looked at the picture. Then she looked up at Reese, back at the picture again, then at Reese a second time. "You and Herbert twins?" she asked.

"I'm a year older," he told her. "We look more alike in pictures than we do in real life."

"If it wasn't for your difference expressions, I'd swear it was your picture," she said. She looked at it again. "I see another difference now. He parts his hair on the other side."

Gentry dropped the picture in his pocket as the medic came in, slamming the screen door behind him. "Hot," the doctor said, mopping his brow. "I can't be very explicit about the time of death, Chief. This heat kept the body temperature from falling. Dead not less than an hour or more than four is as close as I can pin it."

Gentry looked at his watch. "Eleven thirty." He looked at Pamela. "Then he could have been dead before eight this morning."

"Hey," she said. "Don't get any ideas. With a maniac running around, why are you looking at me?"

Shayne said, "He's probably thinking of your twenty-five-thousand-dollar inheritance."

She made a face at the redhead.

The medic handed Gentry the thin strip of metal which had been protruding from the dead man's chest. "Hawkins told me to give you this. No fingerprints, he said."

The pointed end of the implement was stained with dried blood. Chief Gentry gingerly turned it over in his hands. "Looks like a

honed-down spoon handle," he said. Then he examined it more closely. "You can just make out some lettering." He handed it to Shayne. "What is that, Mike? Your eyes are better than mine."

Shayne carried it over to the door for better light. Almost honed away, barely discernible, were the letters, "—leans Cou—"

"Looks like part of 'Orleans County'," Shayne said. "Probably a piece of cutlery from the county jail. Reese must have palmed a spoon and made this weapon out of it. It fits the description of the thing that killed those deputies."

He handed it back to Gentry.

The photographer stuck his head in the door and said, "All finished, Chief. Hawkins said to tell you he didn't find a thing."

Gentry gave him a dismissing nod. He said to the uniformed policeman, "I'll ride back with Mike. You stick around until the morgue boys come for the body." Then he turned to Pamela. "I'll want to get in touch with you again. Will you be here or your regular address?"

"My regular one, I guess."

"What's that?"

She considered the question before saying reluctantly, "My boy friend's cottage at Miami Beach."

If there had been any doubt about the commercial relationship between Pamela and the dead man, her answer dispelled it. Crandall Reese frowned. Shayne wondered what kind of man Gerald Towne was, that he could callously allow his beautiful girl friend to move out periodically and move in with another man for financial gain.

Gentry growled, "I'll want to talk to your boy friend too. Tell him to be available."

V

SHAYNE DROVE Chief Gentry and Reese to police headquarters. They settled in the chief's office, where Gentry questioned Reese exhaustively about his brother's tastes and habits, with the idea of possibly simplifying the search for the suspect. Gentry wanted to know the type of bar Herbert Reese was likely to frequent, if any, and other kinds of places he might go for amusement, or to pass the time.

The answers weren't very satisfactory. What they boiled down to was that Herbert Reese was the sort of introvert who preferred his own company. His brother's opinion was that he wouldn't seek any public place of amusement, but probably would merely hole up in some room.

"He probably has money enough to last for a time without work," he said. "He robbed those deputies of a couple of hundred dollars."

"What's he do when he does work?" Gentry asked.

"He was a clerk in my department at Whalen. Payrolls."

Gentry grunted. "In my opinion your brother is the answer to this, Mr. Reese. But we have to cover all angles. Who was your uncle's lawyer?"

"Why, Bacon and Hedges in New Orleans, I suppose. They're our firm lawyers. Why?"

"I want to know what was in that will. I guess that's all for now. Where are you staying, Mr. Reese?"

Reese said, "I haven't registered anywhere yet. I went straight to Mr. Shayne's office from the plane. I'll probably put up at the Rector."

"I'll be in touch. Want a police guard?"

Reese considered, then shook his head. "I don't think Herb would harm me. Besides, he doesn't know I'm in town."

Shayne drove back to his office, taking Reese along, as the man's rented car was parked there. As they climbed out of the car, Reese said, "I'll be at the Rector if you want to reach me, Mr. Shayne."

"Reach you for what?" the redhead inquired. "You haven't engaged me for anything."

Reese flushed slightly. "Well, then I guess I owe you something for your time."

"My secretary will send you a bill if you do," Shayne said dryly. He smiled without warmth, and walked across the pavement to the building housing his office. Perhaps he was being unjust but he couldn't help holding Reese partly responsible for the tragedy on the beach.

He got a surprise when he walked into the office anteroom. Pamela Crane, her brief shorts and halter changed for a clinging cotton print, was waiting there.

Lucy said primly, "This lady is waiting to see you. She wouldn't say what she wants."

Shayne tossed his hat onto the clothes tree. "Come on in," he said to Pamela, and strode toward his private office.

As he held the door for Pamela to enter, Shayne caught the expression on Lucy's face. It wasn't exactly disapproving, but it wasn't approving either. It was the estimating look one attractive woman frequently gives another, comparing the rival's assets to her own.

Shayne grinned at Lucy and she blushed, realizing he had caught the expression.

When they were both seated in the inner office, the redhead asked, "What can I do for you, Pamela?"

The blonde crossed her legs, casually adjusting her skirt to expose both rounded knees. "Do you think my inheritance from Norbie will be held up until his murder is solved?" she asked.

Shayne offered her a cigarette, took one himself and lighted both with a paper match while he con-

sidered the question. "Is that all you wanted to see me about?" he asked finally.

Blowing out a thin stream of smoke, she shook her head. "Just the first thing. Isn't there a law that a murderer can't inherit from a victim?"

"Yeah," Shayne said. "But if you want legal advice, go to a lawyer. Are you confessing the murder?"

"Of course not. It just occurred to me that until the case is solved, maybe *nobody* will be able to inherit. They might hold up my twenty-five thousand just on the off chance that I'm guilty."

"It's possible," Shayne conceded. "Even probable, if the police tag you as a suspect."

"Then it would be to my advantage to get the case solved quickly, wouldn't it?"

Shayne took a drag on his cigarette. "I suppose. Do you know something?"

"I have a theory."

An amateur detective, Shayne thought resignedly. Pamela hadn't impressed him as the type to have thoughts about much of anything. "Go ahead," he said with forbearance.

"Did you notice how much Crandall Reese resembled that picture?"

"Yeah," Shayne said. "What about it?"

"Nobody around here has seen a picture of Crandall Reese. He just *said* he and his brother resemble each other. Maybe they don't at all."

The redhead stared at her for a moment. Finally he said, "Your theory is that Crandall may actually be his insane brother Herbert, just masquerading as Crandall?"

"Well, the only real difference between the man in the picture and the man who says he is Crandall Reese is their expressions and the way they part their hair. Both are easily changed. How do we know the crazy one didn't murder his brother and adopt his identity? As Crandall he could move about freely without being bothered by the police. I thought it all out when I was comparing the man who says he is Crandall to the photograph."

Shayne took a final drag of his cigarette and punched it out in his desk ash tray. With a grin of amusement, he said, "You didn't think far enough. What would be his purpose?"

"Why, I told you. As Crandall he could move about freely."

Shayne's grin widened. "Let's assume you're right, and see where it takes us. So far as we know, Herb Reese's sole motive in killing his uncle was psychotic revenge. Right?"

Pamela nodded.

"When Crandall arrived at my office, Norbert Whalen was already dead. Assuming that Crandall is really Herbert, and had al-

ready killed his uncle, why would he come to see me? With his purpose accomplished, why bother with an elaborate and dangerous masquerade? Why not just disappear?"

Pamela frowned over this. Reaching across the desk, she punched out her cigarette. "Well, he's a nut," she said dubiously. "Crazy people don't need logical reasons to do things."

"Even maniacs have a peculiar logic of their own. I can see where Herbert might undertake such a fantastic masquerade to gain access to his victim. But by the farthest stretch of imagination I can't see any reason for him to start the masquerade after his uncle was dead."

Pamela's lovely lips pursed in a pout. "It does seem a little silly when you put it that way," she admitted reluctantly. "And it was such a nice theory."

"Is that all you wanted?" Shayne asked pointedly.

She glanced at a jeweled wrist watch, then gave him a provocative smile. "Just one more thing. It's nearly one P.M."

"So?"

"You could take me to lunch, if you like."

The redhead regarded her with mild amusement. "Some other time, maybe," he said with a straight face. "I'm tied up today."

"What other time?" she asked, pinning him down.

"I'll call you," he said noncommittally.

"Not at Gerald's place," she said quickly. "I'd better call you."

So Gerald was the jealous type, Shayne thought cynically. Unless it was strictly a business transaction. Without answering, he stood up and rounded the desk to open the door for her.

She gave him an intimate smile as she went past and said, "Tomorrow, maybe, Michael?"

He merely smiled noncomittally. Lucy looked up from her typewriter to regard Pamela thoughtfully. Obviously she had heard the exchange. Lucy's brown eyes followed the blonde's undulating hips as she crossed the anteroom. As the woman went out, Lucy looked back at Shayne and smiled brightly.

"She's very feminine," she said.

Shayne walked forward, leaned over the wooden railing, tipped up Lucy's chin with one hand and planted a kiss on the end of her nose. "So are you, angel. How'd you like to be taken to lunch?"

Lucy colored clear to her neckline. "I'd like it fine, Michael," she said a little breathlessly.

All during lunch Pamela's odd theory kept running through the redhead's mind. Preposterous as it was, he couldn't shake it. He went over his own arguments again, and they were just as logical as when he had presented them to Pamela.

Nevertheless, after lunch he decided to stop the nagging thought that just possibly her ridiculous theory might be right by doing some checking.

Shayne had spent much time in New Orleans in the past, and had nearly as many contacts there as he did in Miami. He made a long-distance phone call to a reporter friend named David Grady.

"I need some information, Dave," he told the reporter.

"Sure, Mike. What's up?"

"We think your homicidal maniac Herb Reese is in Miami and has murdered an uncle of his here."

This brought an excited series of questions from Grady, who had to have the whole story before he was ready to listen to what Shayne wanted. When the detective had filled him in on the details, Grady finally said, "Okay, Mike. Now what did you want?"

"First, can you get me a description and a photograph of Crandall Reese and mail it to me airmail?"

"Sure, Mike. Want any background on him too?"

"It wouldn't hurt," Shayne said. "Find out what you can. Also find out if by any chance Crandall Reese is still in New Orleans. And if he isn't, does anyone know where he is?"

"Will do. That all?"

"All for now. Can you get right on it?"

"I'll get it in the mail this afternoon. You should have it tomorrow."

"Fine," Shayne said. "Thanks, Dave."

"Glad to be of help," Grady said.

When Shayne hung up, he sat musing for a moment. He was still sure that Pamela's theory was preposterous. But he was glad that he had made the call, so that the last small nagging doubt could be allayed when Dave Grady's letter arrived the next day.

VI

THE EVENING PAPERS carried the full story of the murder. Apparently Chief Gentry had withheld the information that Crandall Reese was in town, probably for fear that the insane killer might strike again, for there was no mention of Crandall.

Shayne got full credit for discovering the body, the news item stating that he had gone to the cottage on a confidential tip that Herbert Reese might try to murder his uncle. Gentry was quoted as saying that an all-out search for the deranged killer was under way.

At two A.M. Shayne was sound asleep in his apartment when his front door buzzer sounded. Switching on his bedlamp, he glanced at his watch, then irritably climbed out of bed. The buzzer sounded

again while he was pulling on a robe and slippers.

Padding across the front room, he switched on a lamp en route to the door. The buzzer impatiently sounded again.

Unlocking the door, Shayne angrily jerked it open.

The hall lights had been switched off, so that he saw the figure in the doorway only by the dim light of the lamp across the room behind him. At first he thought it was Crandall Reese. Instantly he sensed a subtle difference in appearance, though. The visitor's cheeks seemed more hollow, and there was something different about his hair. He wore a different expression, too. Crandall Reese tended to look almost diffident most of the time. This man's eyes smoldered with the fire of madness.

The difference penetrated and Shayne reacted in a split second. As light glinted from a rising gun barrel, the redhead threw himself sidewise to one side of the door.

The gun roared and flame cut the air where Shayne had stood an instant before. Shayne rolled as the gun went off again, the bullet striking the floor where he had first dropped. Bouncing to one knee, the detective swept a heavy glass ash tray from an end table and hurled it at the man in the doorway in the same movement.

The man ducked in time to let the tray hurtle over his head and shatter against the wall on the far side of the hall. But the movement destroyed his aim. His next bullet plunked into the wall yards from Shayne.

Shayne got both feet beneath him to make a flying tackle beneath the gun. But before he could launch himself, the intruder turned and raced down the hall. Straightening, the redhead ran to the door and peered after him.

The door of the elevator, self-service at this time of night, had been braced open by a stick of wood so that it was immobilized at this floor. As the gunman leaped into the car, he kicked loose the brace and the door slid closed.

His face trenched with anger. Shayne slammed his door and locked it. As he sourly examined the two bullet holes in the wall and the one in the floor, he heard doors open along the hall and frightened voices as his neighbors peered out to inquire cautiously of each other what had happened.

Ignoring them, the redhead strode to the phone and dialed police headquarters.

"This is Mike Shayne," he snapped when the desk man answered. "Herbert Reese just shot up my apartment. If you get the area surrounded immediately, you might catch him. He's probably heading out the building's front door about now."

The desk man wanted details, but Shayne cut him off. "Get on

it," he growled. "I'll phone Gentry's home and give him the details."

Will Gentry didn't sound pleased to be awakened at that time of night. "Yeah?" he inquired grumpily.

"Mike, Will. Herb Reese was just here with a gun and tried to kill me."

Gentry came wide awake. "What was that?"

The redhead repeated the statement, then added, "I thought it was Crandall Reese when I opened the door. They *are* enough alike to be twins. Then it registered on me that his hair was parted on the opposite side and his cheeks were thinner. Also he had the look of a maniac—a wild-eyed homicidal look. He fired three times while I rolled around on the floor dodging bullets. I pitched an ash tray at him, missed, and he ran. I phoned headquarters to seal off the area."

Gentry released a long breath. "You live a charmed life, Mike. What do you suppose his grudge against you was?"

"Who knows? I suppose he saw in the paper that I was the one who discovered his uncle's body, and decided I was butting into his business. He doesn't seem to need much motive to kill."

Gentry said, "It's a good thing I didn't tell reporters his brother was with you, or he'd probably be gunning for him too."

"Yeah," Shayne said. Then he thought of something. "Maybe you'd better get a guard over to the Rector anyway, Will. It may have been on the radio that Crandall is in town."

"How could it be?"

"I gave an exclusive by long-distance phone to a New Orleans reporter. The full story would have been in the late-afternoon papers in New Orleans. It may have been picked up and put on the air in some network broadcast."

"Yeah," Gentry said slowly. "I'll get some boys over to the Rector."

When the redhead rang off, he went to the kitchen and fixed himself a tall glass of ice water. Then he poured three ounces of cognac into another glass, carried both to the front room and set them on the low cocktail table in front of the sofa. He lit a cigarette, took a sip of cognac and chased it with ice water.

Fifteen minutes later, his drink finished and his cigarette snubbed out, he was getting ready to go back to bed when the phone rang.

Lifting the receiver, he said, "Shayne speaking."

Crandall Reese's voice, pitched high with excitement, said, "Mr. Shayne, Herb was just here and tried to kill me."

"Where?" Shayne rapped. "Are you at the Rector?"

"Yes. Room Three hundred and four."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. I didn't let him in. When he knocked on the door, I asked who it was. He said, 'Herb,' and I asked what he wanted. He said 'Open up, we've a score to settle.' His voice sounded so crazy, I knew he meant to kill me, so I wouldn't unlock the door. He fired right through it. Three times. The bullets missed me by inches. Then I heard him run off."

"You're sure he's gone?"

"Pretty sure. I can hear people gabbling in the hall about the shooting. I'm not going to open the door to make sure."

"You call the police?"

"I haven't called anyone but you. It just happened."

"Better call them," Shayne advised. "They'll want to start checking the area at once. Incidentally, there are cops already on the way over there. Your brother was here gunning for me less than a half hour ago, and Gentry decided to give you a guard."

"You think Herb might come back?" Reese asked timidly.

"How would I know?" Shayne snapped. "Just in case, keep your door locked until I get there. I'm coming over."

VII

IT WAS ONLY about a five-minute drive from Shayne's apartment hotel to the Hotel Rector. Shayne dressed quickly and arrived fifteen minutes after his phone conversation with Reese.

He reached the hotel's main entrance simultaneously with a lean, sad-faced plain-clothes officer he knew slightly.

"Hello, Gordon," the redhead said. "You here about the shooting?"

"What shooting?" Gordon asked. "They called me out of bed at home to come over and stand guard over some guy named Reese."

"You're a little late then," Shayne said. "While you were on the way, the guy you were supposed to guard him against pumped three bullets through his hotel-room door."

Gordon looked upset.

"Reese is all right," Shayne assured him. "He has instructions to keep his door locked until I get there."

They started into the hotel together, then halted and turned as a radio car screeched to a halt at the curb. Four uniformed officers tumbled out and made for the door.

"Part of the dragnet," Shayne said to Gordon. "They're a little late, too." The gunman in charge of the uniformed detail brought his men to a halt and looked inquiringly at Gordon. "The area's all surrounded," he said. "We're supposed to talk to the victim and search the hotel for the suspect."

"I'll talk to the victim," Gordon

said. "We were just going up. You men question the hotel employees. Come on, Shayne."

As Gordon and Shayne crossed the lobby, the sergeant detailed a man to stand at both of the outside doors, then made toward the desk trailed by the fourth officer. Shayne and Gordon stepped into an elevator and asked for the third floor.

There was quite a crowd surrounding the door to 304. Most were residents of the hotel in pajamas and robes, but two men were fully clothed. One, a thin, bald-headed man with horn-rimmed glasses, Shayne guessed to be the night manager. The other, a retired cop named Halleran whom the redhead had known for years, he knew to be the hotel detective. Both men looked frustrated.

Halleran was holding a gun by the barrel in one hand. He had a handkerchief wrapped around the barrel. He gave the newcomers a morose look.

"Hi, Mike. Hello, Gordon. Maybe you guys can talk him into opening up."

"What's your trouble?" Gordon asked.

"Somebody shot some holes in this guy's door. With this, I guess." He hefted the gun. "At least this was lying on the floor in front of the door when we got here. We can't get him to open up."

"You don't use the right technique," Shayne said. He rapped on the door and called, "Open up, Reese. It's Shayne."

Immediately there was the sound of a bolt drawing back, and the door opened. Crandall Reese, in pajamas and a robe, peered out worriedly. He looked relieved when he saw Shayne. Halleran looked at Shayne with his mouth open.

Shayne walked into the room. Gordon lifted the pistol from the hotel detective's hand by the handkerchief protected barrel and followed. Over his shoulder he said, "We'll take over now, Halleran. Better clear these people out of the hall."

He pulled the door shut behind him.

"Who's this man?" Reese asked, looking at Gordon.

"Sergeant Gordon," Shayne said. "Your police guard."

The redhead turned to examine the door. There were three splintered holes in it at waist level. Directly across the room a shattered window showed where the bullets had ended up.

"Where were you when he fired?" Shayne asked Reese.

"Right at the edge of the door. It's a miracle he missed. He must have gone totally insane."

"Hasn't he been all along?" Shayne asked dryly.

Gordon was examining the gun. "Police thirty-eight," he remarked.

"Probably one of the two he

took from those deputies," Shayne said. "I suppose he dropped it because it was empty. He took three shots at me earlier. He still has a fully-loaded one, though."

Gordon said, "We'll wire the serial number to New Orleans. Should have an answer by morning." Then he looked at his watch. "It's already morning. Two forty A.M."

A tap came at the door and Shayne opened it. It was Halleran. The hall behind him was not empty.

"Anything I can do to help Mike?" the hotel detective asked.

"Yeah," Shayne said. "Did any of these people standing around see the gunman?"

Halleran shook his head. "We figured he ducked into the fire exit just up the hall." He pointed right and Shayne stuck his head out the door to look at a fire door only a few yards away. "We've talked to all employees, and nobody remembers seeing anyone suspicious looking either come in or go out. Of course that doesn't mean much. A dozen gunmen could walk across the lobby, and nobody'd pay any attention if they moved without too much haste and didn't look around furtively."

"We think we know who the gunman was," Shayne said. "Thanks, Halleran."

As the hotel detective moved away, Shayne turned to Gordon. "Looks like things are under control here. I'm going back home to bed. Better get that wire off, if you expect a reply by morning."

"I'll phone the serial number into headquarters right away," Gordon said. "And don't worry about Reese. I'll have the management set up a cot and sleep right in here."

As Shayne moved down the hall toward the elevator, the uniformed sergeant in charge of the search detail got off of it.

"Any luck?" Shayne asked him.

The sergeant shook his head. "Nobody saw nothing. I'm having this Herbert Reese's mug shot sent over to show the employees. Not that it'll do any good to find out somebody saw him. He sure as hell ain't around now."

Shayne moved on into the elevator.

Fifteen minutes later he was back in bed and asleep.

At ten the next morning Shayne walked into Chief Will Gentry's office. The chief's beefy face was morose as he studied a report before him.

"Bad news, Will?" the redhead asked, dropping into a chair and lighting a cigarette.

Gentry shook his head. "Just not good news. It's nothing. This Herbert Reese is a ghost. Nobody saw him enter or leave your apartment hotel. Nobody saw him enter or leave the Rector. We've shaken down practically every rooming house, motel and hotel in

town, and no one of his description has been holed up in any of them."

"Get anything from the gun?" Shayne asked.

"No fingerprints. Got a kickback from New Orleans on the serial number. It was one of the guns taken from those murdered deputies, all right."

Shayne said musingly, "I guess that establishes that it really was Herb Reese, then."

Gentry's curiously rumpled eyelids raised from their habitual droop. "You had some doubts about it?"

"Not really," Shayne said. He leaned forward to knock ashes from his cigarette. "Just a passing thought. Any other developments?"

"The New Orleans police got in touch with Whalen's law firm for us. As Crandall Reese guessed, Whalen left most of his money to charity. Crandall and Herbert were left a hundred thousand each, though of course Herbert will never see his share. The twenty-five thousand Uncle Norbie told Pamela Crane she was going to get must have been a gag. She isn't mentioned in the will."

Shayne smiled sardonically. "She'll love that. Have you heard from Crandall Reese since last night?"

"Sergeant Gordon phoned in a while ago that everything was quiet. Crandall's catching a plane back to New Orleans this evening. He's having his uncle's body shipped back there for the funeral when the coroner releases it."

"Did the autopsy pin down the time of death any closer?"

"A little," Gentry said, "if Pamela told us the truth. She says they had breakfast together just before she left at eight. By examining the stomach contents, they figure from the stage of digestion that he died between nine and eleven. Which clears her, unless her boy friend is lying to cover her. It's a full half-hour drive from Whalen's cottage to Gerald Towne's over at Miami Beach, and he says she was with him from eight thirty to eleven."

Shayne punched out his cigarette and stood up. "Looks as though you've covered all the angles, Will. And it all boils down to the simple case it started out to be. I guess the only problem is to find Herbert Reese."

"Yeah," Gentry said sourly. "So far the police of six states haven't had much luck at that."

"He does seem to be able to stay out of sight pretty well," Shayne said. "It's nine hundred miles from here to New Orleans, and he made it without even a rumor that he'd been seen anywhere en route. Maybe he's using a disguise."

"He wasn't wearing one when you saw him last night, was he?"

Shayne shook his head. "He

looked just like his picture." He moved to the door. "Let me know if anything more develops, Will."

"Sure," the chief said morosely. "If I'm still chief. If we don't net this maniac soon, I may have to resign."

VIII

WHEN SHAYNE arrived at his office, Lucy handed him a large manila envelope with airmail and special delivery stamps on it.

"This just arrived, Michael," she said.

Carrying it into his office, Shayne sat at his desk and ripped it open. It contained an eight-by-ten photograph and a sheet of typewritten paper. On the back of the photograph was written. *Crandall Reese.* Shayne turned it over and studied it.

Pamela Crane's theory had been as preposterous as he had known it would be, the redhead thought glumly. There was no doubt that the man in the photograph was the same one he knew as Crandall Reese. There was a remarkable resemblance to the picture of Herbert Reese, but the face in this picture lacked the hollow cheeks and was smiling.

Tossing it aside, he unfolded the typewritten sheet and began to read.

A frown formed on his face and continued to deepen as he read further. When he finished the report from Dave Grady, he sat musing for some time, worrying the lobe of his left ear with his thumb and forefinger.

Finally he picked up his desk phone and dialed a number. He talked for some minutes, then waited, impatiently drumming his fingers on the desk top.

After a time he said, "Yes, I'm still here. Eight o'clock, did you say? Thanks."

Hanging up, he dialed police headquarters and asked for Chief Gentry.

When the chief came on, the redhead said, "Mike, Will. I think I just broke your case. Want to meet me at the Rector?"

"What's up?" Gentry demanded.

"It'll keep till I see you. How soon can you make it?"

"Ten minutes," Gentry told him, and hung up.

Will Gentry was already waiting in the lobby when Shayne arrived at the Rector. He asked, "What's this all about, Mike?"

"Let's go upstairs," Shayne suggested.

When they knocked at the door of room 304, Sergeant Gordon's voice said, "Who is it?"

"Chief Gentry," the chief growled. "Open up."

The bolt drew back and the door opened. Gentry moved ponderously into the room with Shayne behind him. Crandall Reese, seated on the edge of the

bed, looked up with a smile of greeting.

Gentry looked at Shayne. "All right, Mike. It's your move."

Shayne said, "Pamela Crane really solved this thing, Will, believe it or not. She had a theory. It was such a wild one, I never mentioned it to you. She thought that Herbert Reese had killed his brother Crandall and had assumed his identity. She thought Crandall here was actually Herbert." He jerked his thumb at the man seated on the bed.

Reese's eyes widened and his mouth gaped open. "Are you nuts, Shayne?"

Will Gentry said incredulously, "You mean this guy is actually Herbert?"

"No," Shayne said. "Pamela had her theory backward. But it gave me the hint I needed to figure out what really had happened. It wasn't Herbert who killed Crandall. It was Crandall here who killed Herbert and assumed *his* identity."

Gentry looked confused.

Shayne said, "I had a reporter friend of mine in New Orleans send me a photograph of Crandall, on the off-chance that Pamela's wild theory might be right. It wasn't. There isn't any doubt that this guy is Crandall. But my reporter friend also sent a detailed report on Crandall's background."

He grinned bleakly at the man on the bed. "Yesterday at the cottage you made a remark that you weren't much concerned about money, because you had a good job and simple tastes. They're simple, all right. Particularly your taste in horses. A couple of big-time bookies are into you for over twenty grand, and you've had the word to pay up or take a swim in concrete overshoes."

Crandall Reese licked his lips and stared at the detective.

"When your crazy brother escaped, you saw a fool-proof plan to get out from under and have a pile left over. You knew you were in your uncle's will for a hundred grand. So you bumped your brother, flew to Miami and killed your uncle with the same weapon Herb had used on those deputies, figuring Herb would take the blame. Nobody but you knew of Herb's threat against Uncle Norbert. Because he never made one."

Reese looked from Shayne to Gentry. "You don't believe all this do you, Chief?" he asked in a high voice. "I couldn't have killed my uncle. I was in Shayne's office when he died."

Shayne said, "I phoned the airport. You didn't get in at nine A.M. You arrived at eight. Where were you the two hours before you got to my office?"

Reese said huskily, "They made a mistake. I got in at nine. If my brother's dead, who tried to kill you and me? You even saw him."

"I saw you with your hair reparted and your cheeks deliberately sucked in. You'd turned the hall lights out so I couldn't get a very good look. You weren't trying to kill me. You missed three times at point-blank range. Chief Gentry's remark that he was going to check the terms of the will with your uncle's lawyers worried you. So you had to *prove* that Herb was still around."

"No," Reese denied. "He shot at me too."

"Nuts," Shayne said disgustedly. "You pumped three bullets through your own door, ducked inside and locked it. It was smart of you to drop the gun in the hall. As you expected, the police checked the serial number with New Orleans, and established that it was one of the murdered deputies' guns. That seemed to prove beyond all doubt that Herb was the killer."

Gentry said, "Mike, how do you know he killed his brother? Maybe he just assumed his identity and Herb is hiding somewhere."

"He's buried somewhere," Shayne said harshly. "How would Crandall get hold of that homemade knife and the deputy's gun if he hadn't killed Herb?"

After considering this, Gentry nodded. "I'll buy that," he said. "On your feet, Reese. We're going down to headquarters."

Reese stood up. Hs face hardened defiantly. "You can't prove any of this, Shayne. You're just guessing."

"We can find proof," Shayne told him. "There were two deputies' guns. I'll bet a search of this room will turn up the second one."

Reese stared at him for a long moment. In a quiet voice he said, "You won't have to search for it. I'll show it to you."

Then his hand flashed to his hip.

A moment too late Sergeant Gordon's hand started for his belt holster. A moment after that Chief Gentry reached for his gun.

Shayne was moving at the same instant Crandall Reese's hand started to lower. With a fluid motion he stepped forward and clamped a large hand over Reese's wrist as the gun started to come up. He pushed downward just as the gun fired, and the bullet smashed into the floor between Shayne's feet.

Then Shayne's right fist crashed into Crandall Reese's jaw, lifting him entirely off his feet and laying him neatly in the center of the bed.

Shayne glanced at Gentry, who was just bringing his gun out, then at Gordon, who now had his out and leveled. Both men slowly shoved them back into holsters. Shayne stooped to pick up the gun Reese had dropped.

"Final evidence," he said, handing it to Gentry. "This ought to cinch your case."

*Date With*_____A CORONER

A CHILLING SUSPENSE NOVELET

by FLOYD WALLACE

THEY TRANSFERRED the call to me. It was early. Not too early for business though. In my kind of job it never is. "Homicide. Lieutenant Kenneth Reed," I said.

"This is the Green Hills Hospital. One of our patients is dead." It was a professionally calm voice, not a tremor in it. The head nurse, beyond a doubt. Some head nurses ought to give lessons to army sergeants.

I muttered something about you can't win them all. She shouldn't have heard but she did. At the second cup of coffee my nerves are still jumping and I talk loud.

"I understand how you feel, Lieutenant. Some patients do die —but not from this cause. He was stabbed during the night."

Mentally I let loose of the button I'd been reaching for. This was my case, not the coroner's. A knife leaves no doubt.

"We'll be right over," I said. "Don't disturb the body." I wasn't as crisp as she. I don't think I could be. I got the feeling that nothing was going to interfere with the routine of the hospital, murder included.

© 1959, by Floyd Wallace

Detective Reed slighted only one angle. The slaying was so unusual he forgot to stay tough . . . with the actual killer!

I took down a few sketchy details and passed them on and grabbed another cup of coffee and drank half of it. I went down and picked up Detective Sergeant Johnny Podesto. Johnny's Mexican, a good man but new. I climbed in the car and told him where. The sun was bright as we started out.

"Ever hear of Green Hills?" I said. I had, vaguely, but I couldn't quite place it. I thought I knew all the hospitals in Los Angeles. This was one was new to me.

Johnny flipped a cigarette out the window as we came to a stop sign. "Sure," he said. "Out in Griffith Park. Not far."

Griffith Park is big, very big, but I didn't know there was anything like that in it. We were driving up Vermont Avenue.

"A cousin tried to get in there once," said Johnny. "Didn't make it. Full at the time."

We swung onto Los Feliz, went a few blocks and turned into the park. "Finally got him into Duarte," said Johnny. "It's a good place, but Green Hills is better."

Now I knew what he was talking about. Duarte's a big t.b. sanatorium twenty miles outside Los Angeles. Green Hills then was also a sanatorium but it was smaller and in the city. That's why I wasn't familiar with it. Homicide and t.b. ordinarily don't mix.

The road we were on went through the park. Johnny burned the tires and swerved off it up a drive. I got a glimpse of the sign as we turned. GREEN HILLS HOSPITAL AND SANATORIUM. I'd passed it many times but hadn't paid it any particular attention. I remembered more than once looking up at the building from the highway. I'd thought it just a big house in isolation high on the hill at the edge of the park. It wasn't fancy in comparison to some of the residences around here but it wasn't out of place. They build all sorts of houses on hills in L. A. In the twenties and thirties they went in heavily for Spanish castles and now it's the low modern type, with swimming pools. Anything in between can pass unnoticed.

Johnny pulled up the hill to the level parking lot in front of the hospital. It was a two-story wood and stucco structure, *ell* shaped. The long vertical part of the *ell* was parallel to Los Feliz below and the short horizontal base fronted on the road through the park. It was a bigger place than I had thought.

A traffic patrol car was already parked in the lot. I got out and nodded to the officer standing beside the car. "Hi Jake. You got here fast."

"Yeah. We were on Los Feliz when we got the call." He jerked his head to the left. "It's over there. Bud's keeping watch."

There was a winding path

through trees and bushes. About fifty feet from the parking lot was a small cottage. One end of it was close to the short wing of the hospital. There was space to walk between if you didn't swing your arms. Bud was standing by the door of the cottage. His cap was off. It was already warm, but not that warm.

"Cheer up," I grinned at him. "It's not that catching."

"The hell it ain't," he said. "Why are all these nurses running around with gauze masks on their faces?"

"That's so they don't give the patient a cold," I said. "Patients out here are practically cured."

"One of them's cured," he said. "In here."

We went in. It was bare and clean. Clean except for blood congealed around the body. It was sprawled face down on the floor. He was wearing pajamas, pullover type. The top was half off, over his head. Someone had slipped a knife in his back. Twice. Neat, if not professional. Once would have been enough.

Bud stuck his head in the door as Johnny and I looked around. "Need me?" he asked. He was hoping I'd say no. He wanted to get away from the sanatorium fast.

Down on Los Feliz traffic was snarling louder. It wasn't eight yet and people were going to work. "They can bash in their cars without your help," I said. "Where's the knife?"

"There wasn't any. This is just the way I found it."

"Go outside and see if you can find it. Don't tramp down everything either." He's a good man with a car, good with a gun. That sums up his goodness.

"Wait a minute," I said before he disappeared. "Where the hell is everyone?" Usually you have trouble keeping people back from a murder. Here there wasn't a person in sight. It was almost eerie.

"Someone came down and told the nurses to go back to work," said Bud. He looked over his shoulder and stood aside. "Here she comes now."

She walked with the brisk step nurses have. A little above medium height and weight, she was solid rather than plump. I didn't try to guess her age.

"I'm Leah Mears, head nurse," she said.

She didn't have to say it. I could see who was boss. I nodded. She was staring past me into the room. "You don't have to look," I said. "We'll take care of it."

"I'm not likely to faint," she said, turning to me. "I've seen more dead men than you have."

It startled me. I guess she had.

"He was almost well," she said. "Now we'll never know how he would have made out."

I could see she was going to give me trouble. "Who discovered

the body? It is Ralph Larabee, isn't it?"

"Yes, Ralph Larabee. It was discovered by the attendant who brings them breakfast. The attendant starts out at seven and comes here first because this cottage is isolated from the rest."

"So he must have got here at seven two or three?"

"About then. He knocked and when no one answered, pushed in. He saw the body and immediately came back to the infirmary. The night nurse was still on duty but I had come in early, so I took over."

"Where's the attendant?" I said.

She looked at me as if I'd suggested communal bathing for her patients. "Where would he be? There are two hundred and eighty patients who must have breakfast. Of course he has help in serving them."

"Two hundred and seventy nine," I said. "Well, send him over as soon as he gets through. Who's the doctor in charge?"

"Doctor Shanberg. He doesn't live here. I called him shortly after I talked to you. He'll be here soon."

I heard the lab car drive up and park. "Miss Mears"—I looked at her face and saw it was miss—"do you have any idea who killed him?"

"Not the least. He wasn't well liked—but neither am I."

"Did he have many visitors?"

"None to my knowledge. It's rather hard to check a patient out here, but I can ask the ward nurses. They'll know who came while he was in the infirmary."

"Do that. Who else lives in the cottage?"

"Normally there are three. One patient was released a few days ago and we've had no one to send out. That leaves only Walter Carroll here."

"I'll talk to him," I said, nodding to Johnny. "You stay here and see that lab does their job."

A narrow screened porch ran the length of the cottage and the rooms opened off the porch. She stood in front of me and I could see she wasn't going to move. "Lieutenant Reed, I must caution you," she said.

"Go ahead," I said. I've been cautioned before. I expect it when someone's been murdered.

"I know you've heard the treatment of tuberculosis has advanced considerably in the last few years. It has. Penicillin, PAZ, streptomycin, new x-ray techniques and better gastric examinations. We're proud of what we've developed. But much still depends on the patient. He must have absolute rest—he must remain calm and peaceful. If he's worried or upset it can undo what has taken us months or even years to build up."

"I'll see that he doesn't get upset," I said. "Murder's nothing to worry about."

"Lieutenant," she said, boring at me with eyes that could spot a minor infraction of the rules a hundred beds away, "these are my patients. I'm responsible for their care. Don't disturb them unnecessarily. Don't threaten them." She walked away.

She was just a nurse and didn't know anyone and didn't have any influence. Nevertheless I had the feeling that she'd be uncomfortable to tangle with. Newspapers would love to get headlines into a cop shoving a tubercular around. Particularly if there wasn't clear-cut proof of guilt. Glumly I watched her leave. I'd have to use the gentle approach.

I went to see Walt Carroll.

II

CARROLL WAS LYING on the bed. There was a vase of flowers on the stand and a dark lounging robe hanging on the back of the door. Otherwise it was a duplicate of the murdered man's room. Walt nodded as I came in.

"You know what happened up there?" I said.

"Yeah. I went up when the attendant yelled."

"You and nobody else?"

"Nobody else can hear. Some nurses came down but Mears sent them back."

"What did you hear last night?"

"Nothing. I was asleep."

"A man was killed in the same cottage and you didn't hear anything?"

He blinked. His eyes were red. He didn't seem to have spent the peaceful night he said he had. "We're at opposite ends of the cottage. He was killed with a knife. What do you expect me to hear, Lieutenant?"

Nothing I could do with that—yet. "We'll let it go at that—you sleep sound. Anything else I should know?"

"Nothing. Or maybe there is. You'll probably find my prints in his room. I went there now and then. I saw him yesterday."

This was more like it. I was pretty sure he was the man I wanted. All I needed was proof. It would come as I dug into it. "I thought you're supposed to keep contact to a minimum," I said.

He shrugged. "There's only one bath in the cottage and we all have to use it. What difference does it make if I sit in his room?"

"I see," I said. "You must have known him pretty well, living so close to him."

"Not very well. He kept pretty much to himself," Walt said. I didn't say anything and he had to go on. "He was from Chicago or Detroit, some place like that. He travelled a lot. He was an insurance salesman."

"That's all you know about him?"

"All I can think of."

I took out a cigarette but didn't

light it. "Figure on staying here for a while. Don't try to leave."

"How long do you think I'd last if I did pull out?"

"I don't know," I said. "I've heard of people getting well without treatment."

"Plenty of us die with the best of care," he said. "I'll be here."

I was sure he would be. That's why I wasn't taking him in. He was afraid of what he had inside him. He lived with it, but he was afraid. I glanced at the binoculars on the stand beside the bed. Larabee had them too. "What do you use these for? Races, football games?"

"Nothing to do here," he said. "We watch birds, wildlife."

There was dust on the case. He didn't watch very often. "Pleasant pastime," I said. "Better than sliding a knife into someone."

His eyes flickered but he didn't say anything. He seemed relieved that Larabee was dead. Relieved and worried. He knew I suspected him. It was hard to believe he hadn't heard anything last night.

"There'll be someone in to look over your room," I said. "Don't throw things out."

I went past the dead man's room on my way to the office. Men from the lab were shaking down the place as well as the photographers would let them. One paper was for the respectable family trade and insisted the body be covered. The rest were impatient with him and were complaining because the wounds weren't large and wouldn't show up well in the afternoon editions. I shoved through them before they could ask questions.

I didn't learn much from the hospital record. Ralph Larabee, age 42, was from Chicago. I questioned Mears about it. Wasn't it unusual that he came so far? It wasn't. Green Hills had a national reputation. People came from all over. She was proud of the place.

For the rest, Larabee was an insurance salesman, company unspecified, five foot nine, a hundred and forty three on admittance, had gained thirty pounds since. His only living relative was Mrs. Beulah Larchmont of Champaign, Illinois. There was an address for her and the name of the doctor in Chicago who had referred him to Green Hills.

Mears didn't want to let go of the record but I made it plain she'd have it back as soon as it was photostatted. I wanted a sample of his handwriting. I was reasonably sure it was mostly misinformation he had put down. It was there for anybody to see who wanted to.

I looked at it again. He said he was an insurance salesman—but he didn't list a dime's worth of insurance. No sickness or hospitalization he could collect on. That wasn't right, it couldn't be. It suggested that he had a record with the police he was trying to conceal. May-

be this was the reason he had been killed.

The doctor came in while I was going over this. He was cooperative but didn't add a thing to my knowledge. He seemed to know every patient's symptoms and how they were getting on but he didn't know, or care, what they were like as people. I got the idea that he was a handy man to have on the right side of a prescription blank but he was no good at all to someone who was trying to solve a crime. The only thing I learned from him was that he hadn't killed Larabee. He lived in Pasadena, had gone home at eight and could account for the intervening time. I got through with him in a hurry. He was happy to get on with his work.

Next was the attendant who discovered the body. He was about sixty, had once had t.b. himself. Released, he had stayed on at Green Hills doing odd jobs. He wanted to be in a place he'd be taken care of if the healed lesions became active again. He couldn't tell me anything. I let him go.

The sanatorium was making me edgy. Everyone I questioned looked at me as if I ought to know the answer before I said a word. They belonged to a fraternity I couldn't join until I went to the same school. The school of t.b. Half of them had had it and the rest were almost sure they were going to get it, nurses, doctors, and attendants. I got out and went to look the place over.

The hospital—they called it infirmary—was *ell* shaped. The long main wing divided the grounds into two parts, uphill and down. At the right the main building ended in a tangle of underbrush and trees and a short distance beyond that was a rubble of boulders. At the left, near the short older wing, was a steep embankment that sloped down to the roadway that ran through the park. Above the infirmary were all of the cottages except the one that Larabee had been killed in.

That narrowed it down. I had learned no check was kept on the cottages. For that matter there were only two nurses on duty throughout most of the night in the infirmary. One upstairs in the infirmary, and one down. Anyone could leave his cottage and not be missed as long as he was back by the time the attendant came with breakfast.

Still, it would be hard to get down from the upper cottages without being seen or making a noise. Anyone who did would have to crash through the thick underbrush or take a chance on the steep slope that dead-ended at the infirmary. In the middle of the night it would be a precarious business for someone not in the best of health. Of course it was possible to walk through the lobby in the infirmary but that's where the night nurse

was stationed. I questioned her. She said it had been quiet last night and she hadn't left the desk for more than a few minutes and she hadn't seen anyone come through.

There was another possibility. Someone from the outside could have parked his car on Los Feliz, walked two blocks to the drive and come up it to visit and kill Larabee.

I didn't think so. Johnny and the men from the lab would turn up some evidence in the murdered man's room.

Meanwhile there were still a few things to be checked. The short wing of the infirmary adjacent to the cottage hadn't been accounted for. I poked around and peered in —on the ground floor were offices and laboratories. I stopped a nurse who came by and confirmed that neither were often used at night and that last night definitely they hadn't been.

Upstairs was different. I climbed the steps at the juncture of the two wings and looked around. There were more offices and a storeroom or so. But at the back, next to the cottage, was a two-patient ward. Why it was so far removed from the other wards I didn't know. Probably the place had been remodeled more than once and this arrangement had been in the nature of an afterthought.

I got permission to interview the two patients. Downstairs in the infirmary were men. Upstairs it was women. One of them was rather nice-looking, though I really couldn't tell since she didn't have make-up on.

The nurse told them what I wanted, going through the hospital routine with thermometers and pulse. They couldn't talk for a few minutes, so I lounged around gathering impressions. It was an ordinary hospital ward, a rod running the length of the room and a curtain against the wall which could be pulled out to separate the two beds. Each of them had a stand for personal effects. I caught sight of a mail order dress catalogue. They were in here for months, perhaps years. It was the only way they could shop.

The nurse was through with the woman on the far side first. I went to talk to her. Mrs. Lucile Altman, about thirty-five, dark hair with a few streaks of gray. There was a picture of a little girl on the stand.

"No I didn't," she said in answer to my question. "I'm farther away than Sally is, but I would have heard if there was anything. I'm a light sleeper."

"You're sure?"

"Of course. I wake up at the slightest noise." She looked spitefully at the nurse. "I keep telling them but they won't do a thing for me."

The edge of a smile crinkled past the gauze mask. "Now you know you had a donital last night."

A donital isn't much stronger than an aspirin. If she had trouble sleeping she had reason for a complaint. The nurse looked at me. "Is it all right to take her out?"

"Sure. She didn't hear anything."

The nurse wheeled the bed into the hall and down to the balcony on the main wing. Fresh air. For that matter all the windows in the place were open. Somebody should have heard something.

I turned around. Sally Craig had put on makeup. With that she looked nice, damn nice in bed. Not that I was going to get so close it would make a difference. She laid the lipstick on the stand and I sat down beside her.

"What about you?" I said.

"Nothing," she said. "Oh wait, maybe I did. I don't think it means anything."

"Let me decide that."

She frowned, trying to remember. "Both of us had gone to sleep. I woke up. The night watchman had stopped at the cottage and was talking to Larabee. I didn't hear what they said, but I recognized Larabee's voice."

"You knew him that well? You could identify his voice?"

"Not well. But I did know him. I was in a cottage myself until recently. They brought me back a few weeks ago."

She wasn't asking for sympathy but she had mine. She was a sick girl, whether she knew it or not. I think she knew. "What about Walt Carroll? How well do you know him?"

"Quite well. I know what you're thinking but you're wrong. He didn't kill Larabee."

That told me more than I had expected. I looked at her and she went on. "He was already in the cottage when I was released from the infirmary. Larabee didn't come out until later. Walt is about my age and I got to know him better. Most of the patients are older."

I didn't know why I hadn't foreseen this. The hospital was almost a separate world. Contact with the outside was negligible. Most patients didn't *feel* sick; they were merely tired. But they were not too tired to have emotions. All they lacked was someone to fasten them to. Sally had found someone. I made a mental note of it. Sally Craig would lie if she thought it would help her boy friend.

"What's this about the watchman? This is the first I've heard of him."

"You've seen what it's like. We're on the edge of the park, a huge wild area. We're not fenced in. Prowlers can come from either side, though they seldom do. But a patient might hemorrhage or have an attack and need pills."

She indicated a large jar on the stand. "We take two hundred and ten of these a week. It's easy to run out. All a patient in the cottage has to do is turn on the light

and shine it out the window. The watchman comes by every hour and calls a nurse or doctor or gets him what he wants."

"What time did you hear the watchman?"

"About ten or fifteen to eleven. They talked and the watchman went away. He came back in a few minutes."

Now I had something definite. The coroner would fix the death approximately, but we had somebody who had seen Larabee alive at eleven. "Then what?"

"I went to sleep," she said. She glanced at the clock and reached for pills, brushing against the lipstick. It fell off and rolled under the stand.

"Don't bother," she said as I stood up to get it.

The stand was a few inches from the wall and the bed was next to it. I rolled the bed away and squeezed in by the stand. It was on casters and moved easily. I bent down for the lipstick and could hear Johnny Podesto talking to one of the lab men.

I stood up in surprise. Standing I couldn't hear anything. I looked at Sally.

"This is the original building," she said. "They added the new wing and changed things around. That's why one of the cottages is so isolated. I think they also forgot to plug up one ventilator. It opens behind the stand!"

I handed her the lipstick which she wiped off with a tissue dipped in alcohol. I bent down again. I could hear Johnny talking. It was louder as I moved toward the head of the bed. That added up. I brushed my hands and rolled the bed back in place.

"That explains why you heard them last night and it didn't waken Mrs. Altman," I said.

"I never thought of it, but I guess it does," she said. "I must be able to hear things she can't." I decided she was pretty. You'd never know Sally Craig was sick except that she always had a tissue in her hand. She coughed.

"Thanks. I'll check the watchman. Anything else?"

She shook her head.

Before I left an attendant came in, a woman of about fifty. She wore a gauze mask. I'd asked the head nurse about that. It was required of all attendants and student nurses, non-professional help. Regular nurses and doctors didn't wear them. Professional risk, she called it.

The attendant upended the hamper beside the bed, careful not to touch the clothing that tumbled out into the cart. There was a dark stain on a lounging robe. Blood.

"That yours?" I asked sharply.

She nodded. "That's why they brought me in from the cottage," she said, showing me the tissue she'd been holding to her lips.

"I'm sorry."

"So am I," she said.

III

I INQUIRED and found the watchman in a cottage in the rear at one side. He confirmed the story. At ten to eleven Larabee had turned the light on him and asked for aspirin. The watchman got them from the nurse on duty and brought them back. Larabee went to bed. Next time around the watchman hadn't noticed anything unusual. That established it. Larabee was alive at eleven, had been dead for several hours at seven.

I went back. The body had been taken away and the lab men were gone. Johnny Podesto was sitting outside. He lighted a cigarette as I came up.

"Find anything?" I asked.

"Nothing special." He broke the match and tossed it behind him, in the direction of Walt Carroll's room.

I indicated I understood. "Let's go. You told them to stay out of there?"

He laughed. "Nobody will move in for a few days."

We went toward the car. I waited until I was sure I couldn't be overheard. "What did you pick up?" I asked.

He blew out smoke. "Couple of things. I believe Larabee was an ex-con."

It wasn't surprising. First, there was no reason a criminal should be immune. It wasn't exactly a class or income disease. I knew there were several doctors in the sanatorium. The head nurse had told me there was even a wealthy society matron in the sanatorium last year.

"Interesting. What makes you think that?"

"I talked to one of the attendants. Years ago he used to be a guard in a prison. He said Larabee was always using expressions only someone who had served time would know."

"Maybe Larabee had been a guard too." I didn't believe it. "What else?"

We arrived at the car. Johnny leaned against it and reached in his pocket. He handed me something wrapped in tissue. "Lab's gone over it. No prints on it except his."

I unwrapped it. It was a bank book. Something fluttered out. I caught it and unfolded it. It was a deposit slip for two thousand dollars, dated nine days ago.

"He was a good insurance salesman," I said.

"He must have been," said Johnny. "He couldn't go farther than a block from the cottage and yet he found someone to pay him money like this. It's my guess he was selling the only kind of insurance he was familiar with."

As far as I was concerned it was a good guess. Blackmail. Larabee had earned his date with the coroner. He ought to have known

that when a man is threatened, murder comes naturally.

I looked at the slip. Ordinarily Larabee would have been more careful. But he couldn't leave the sanatorium. He'd taken a chance and mailed it in. When we dug into it, the return slip would reveal who killed him. Now the pieces were beginning to fall together.

"It adds," I said.

An attendant wheeled a steam cart by and a whiff came my way. I suddenly remembered I'd had two and a half cups of coffee for breakfast. It was noon now. Johnny grinned at me. "This ought to keep until we get something into us. I know a place down the street." We went there.

We sat in the Casa Mexico and finished off the beer we'd ordered with lunch. Enchiladas, chili rellenos, tacos, fried beans and rice, a green aslad. Good if you like Mexican food. I do.

"Now what?" said Johnny.

He was thinking of the deposit slip. "Better go out and look at it," I said. It was a branch bank near the Santa Anita racetrack.

"It's a long way out," said Johnny.

"You've got nothing better to do," I said.

I looked at the book. Larabee hadn't been exactly broke when he made the last deposit. No doubt the sanatorium was costing him plenty—but he hadn't needed the money for that. He had been too greedy.

Johnny stood up. "I'll take you back and get going."

I handed him the book as we went out. "Check on all the deposits. You may uncover more than one person who's been paying him off." I was hoping there wouldn't be.

It was after one when I got back to headquarters. There were a few odds and end of other cases that had been hanging fire and I got them out of the way. From time to time reports on Larabee came in and I went through them. Johnny's hunch, and mine, proved to be correct. Larabee had a record. Two convictions in the east on which he'd served time, fraud, burglary. There was also a murder which couldn't be pinned on him. He seemed to operate alone. But there was nothing current against him now. As far as the law and the undertaker were concerned he was clean.

About four thirty Johnny came back and laid a photostat on my desk. "That the best you can do?" I said.

"You know how nasty those little branches of big banks can be," he said. "The manager wouldn't let the check go out until the D. A. sends for it."

"It'll do," I said. "This all?"

"That's all. The initial deposit and then nothing until this."

I looked at the photostat. The

check was signed by Thomas L. Carroll. I picked up the sanatorium file on Walt Carroll. He was part owner of a hardware store in Lakewood. The other partner was Thomas L. Carroll, his brother.

Johnny hung over my shoulder. "Shall we go out and talk to him?"

I was wondering about that myself. I took up the classified phone book and leafed through it until I came to the advertisement for their store. I couldn't tell from that, of course, but the ad did take up quite a bit of space in the phone book. Probably fairly prosperous. Tom Carroll wasn't likely to leave his business and run for the border. At least not until we had more on him.

What finally decided me was a report that had come in half an hour before that I hadn't looked at. They'd traced down something on Walt Carroll. He'd served time in the east for larceny. It was quite a few years ago. He'd been in the same prison with Larabee.

It was clear enough, brother protecting brother. Walt was the one I wanted. "It's a long way out to Lakewood," I said to Johnny. "It'll keep till tomorrow. I've got a few things I want to do tonight."

After he left I talked to the Captain and got him to station a man to watch the sanatorium. A couple of things were puzzling me and I didn't want to jump in until I got them straightened out. But I wanted Walt there when I did move.

By morning the reports were complete. Ralph Larabee had died of knife wounds between eleven-thirty and twelve-thirty. There was no sister in Champaign and never had been. He had no living relatives. The hospital could have his body back to see how far they'd gotten before a swifter disease had intervened.

I gave the patient files to Johnny and told him to take them back. While he was out there he should look for the knife. It was one thing we didn't have.

I bought a couple of papers and went down to eat before I started out. It was getting to be a good murder. It really shouldn't have been. There was nothing spectacular about it—but there hadn't been any spectacular murders for quite some time."

It was the unusual angle that made it popular. Man slain in sanatorium where he had gone to get well.

IV

I DROVE OUT to Lakewood on the freeway. Lakewood is a contractor's dream, a new city built in the last ten years. More than a hundred thousand people living on what I remembered as an open field. They didn't know each other because they hadn't had time to get acquainted. This was one thing

that was puzzling me. I expected Tom Carroll to clear it up for me.

I parked in front of the store. It must be making money but not as much as I had thought. The sanatorium was expensive and the treatment would have to continue. Two thousand might have been hard to scrape up. And the brothers couldn't have been so foolish as to suppose it was the last demand Larabee would make.

I went into the store, recognizing Tom at once. He was a bigger man than his brother, older, but the resemblance was there. I wandered around until he finished with a customer. I showed him who I was when he came over. He blinked but didn't seem surprised. We went to a glassed-in office at the rear. A woman was typing, probably his wife. He asked her to take over the store while we talked.

"What do you want?" he asked when she left.

I laid down the photostat of the check.

He looked at it. "You got to that fast," he said.

"You should have taken care of Larabee before you laid out so much," I said. "No sense throwing the stuff away."

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I paid that for legitimate services."

"Sure. For not mentioning that your brother served a stretch in prison a few years back."

He looked at me bleakly. "He was a young kid," he said. "The point is he served it. He was completely through with that kind of life and was going straight. Nobody would hold it against him here."

That's what I couldn't figure. They wouldn't. It was a new community. Nobody knew who they were buying from. They didn't care. Walt was in no danger of losing his job or anything else. So why had they paid out two thousand?

I folded the photostat and tried another approach. "What did you say this was for?"

"I didn't say. But if you want to know, it's for some marketing ideas."

That wouldn't be hard to break but I'd let the prosecuting attorney do it. "The only thing Larabee knew about a hardware store was that it's a place to buy burglary tools," I said.

"I paid him for ideas, not experience. Even an ex-convict can have ideas."

He wasn't giving an inch and I didn't care. I let it pass. "Where were you two nights ago?"

"Rotary meeting. Some of the boys came over to my house afterward and stayed quite late."

I put the photostat in my pocket. "That lets you out, doesn't it?"

"It does. I can give you the names of the people who were with me."

"I'll look into it later," I said as I got up.

No doubt he'd call his brother as soon as I left. They must have discussed things yesterday. It didn't matter. I glanced casually at the display of knives as I went out. I hadn't thought of it before, but it would be nice to tie the murder weapon in with the store.

I drove back on the freeway. It was time to get Walt. There were things that weren't going to be cleared up wih anything less than a confession. Walt was sick, didn't have stamina. He'd open up under pressure.

I pulled in at the sanatorium and parked. I went in search of Johnny. It was a nice day. Mocking birds sang in the trees and a squirrel dashed across the path. It was hard to believe I was two minutes from a busy street in Los Angeles.

Johnny was poking in the narrow wedge of grass behind the cottage, near the embankment that sloped down to the roadway. He stood up as I came near.

"Find anything?"

"Nope. It will take an army to search this place."

"Never mind. I know how to get it."

We went to the cottage. The door was latched. I rattled it and Walt Carroll got up to let us in. He lay down on the bed.

"Don't be in a hurry to get settled," I said. "Put on your street clothes. Come on. Let's go."

He didn't move. He lay on the bed and stared at us. "I wouldn't take me in if I were you."

He was confident, damn confident. I wondered fleetingly if I had made a mistake. "Got a good reason?"

"Lots of them. The hospital pulls some weight. The AMA and the Tuberculosis Association are heavier. Add them up and they're quite impressive. They'll ride you hard."

I laughed at that. "I don't think so. Your brother can't get you out of it either."

"He doesn't have to get me out. Nobody does. I've never been in it."

I looked at him closely. He wasn't as nervous as the first time I'd seen him. His eyes were clear and he was relaxed—the effect of having the blackmail threat removed. But would that account for it if murder replaced it? I ran my tongue over my lips.

"I suppose you're going to tell me you weren't here when Larabee was killed?"

"That's it exactly. I'm not anxious to have the hospital find it out but I've got to tell you. They've thrown out people for less—make them go to another sanatorium if they break rules."

All the little inconsistencies I couldn't straighten out rose up in my mind. I didn't let him see that

I might believe him. "Go on with your story," I said.

"Lights are out in the cottages at ten," he said. "I waited a few minutes and then went down the hill. There's a bar two blocks down the street on Los Feliz. The Zebra Room. Another man from the sanatorium joined me while I was there. There's a bartender and two waitresses. They know both of us."

Johnny looked at me. "Shall we take him in?"

He had a lot to learn. I shook my head. "He's lying, but I have to make sure. You stay here with him. I'll go down and check."

I got in the car and drove down. When I came out of the Zebra Room I wasn't feeling good.

His alibi stood up.

I had to start from the beginning. Walt Carroll was a cop hater and he wasn't cooperative but I couldn't arrest him for that. I still thought it had connection with blackmail. But I couldn't prove it. Had they hired somebody to do it while they provided themselves with alibis? Maybe. But Tom Carroll looked too smart to get into that kind of a jam. Anyway they'd have had enough sense to get rid of the deposit slip.

The trouble was with the sanatorium. People walked in and out of it, like it was a motel. That's what had thrown me off with Walt Carroll. He couldn't leave the place—but that one night he had. Looking back I could see that he had been drinking heavily. All the signs were there. There were at least four people to prove he couldn't have killed Larabee. He had reason to, but he hadn't done it.

I went back and questioned him. He didn't tell us anything. Maybe he knew, but he wasn't saying. There wasn't any way to get it out of him.

I tapped Johnny Podesto and we went out. Walt glared at us as we left. He didn't like us. That's all right. I didn't like him. I glanced back. He was lying on the bed staring at the ceiling. Relieved, but not exactly happy. I'd given a lot to know what was on his mind.

"Now what?" said Johnny when we were out of earshot. "Start questioning everyone?"

"There's not time for it. There are ninety some patients in the cottages alone. Plus attendants, nurses, and some of the doctors. We wouldn't know whether anyone was lying or not when we got through with that bunch. No. We'll have to look for the knife."

"I've looked," said Johnny. "So did four or five others the first day. We went through every room in the cottage, including Walt's."

"We'll look again," I said.

I went into Larabee's room at the end. It was still empty, undisturbed. The knife wasn't there; it would have been found. I came out and stood between the cottage and the old wing of the infirmary.

I tried putting myself in the murderer's shoes. I had killed a man. I wasn't a professional criminal, just an ordinary guy who had killed and had to get rid of the weapon. Why hadn't I left it sticking in him after wiping off the prints? I didn't know, but I had to get rid of it. I looked up the hill. Up and beyond was Griffith Park, five thousand acres of wilderness. Up there it could never be found.

But suppose I didn't have time to go up, or I was afraid I'd be seen by the watchman? I wouldn't dispose of it in the area between the cottage and the parking lot. Too many people would be tramping back and forth when the body was discovered. I'd go the other way.

So I went the other way. Johnny stood beside me, looking down at the steep, weed-covered embankment. "We examined that."

"Good?"

"Pretty good."

"That won't do. We've got to go over every square inch. Start at the drive end and work up and down in strips. I'll take this end. We'll meet in the middle."

Johnny looked at his neatly pressed suit and the shine on his shoes. He grumbled but went. It was late in the afternoon before he found it.

Meanwhile I worked up and down the embankment, turning over everything that might conceal the weapon. Once or twice I looked up and saw Sally Craig gazing out of the top story of the old infirmary. She waved at me and I waved back. I'd have to remember her when she got out of the place.

It was nearly sundown when Johnny came over. I knew he had it. It was a kitchen knife with a blade about seven inches long—strong and quite sufficient to do the job. I took it, holding it in the handkerchief he carried it in. There was dried blood on the blade and a scrap of tissue clinging to it. There didn't seem to be any prints but lab could tell better about that than I could.

"Where was it?"

"Over there. Wedged between two rocks. I pushed a stick in the ground to mark the place."

We climbed up the embankment. At the top we dusted ourselves off. We would have been cleaner digging ditches. We went across the drive to the kitchen. Dinner was over and the head cook—she insisted we call her dietician—was relaxing over a pot of coffee. She was about forty, two hundred pounds. A big booming voice.

"Ever see this?"

She started to take it, jerking her hand back when she saw the blood. "Nice knife."

"Yeah. Have you seen it before?"

"Naw. We don't use that kind. Want some coffee?"

"You're sure?" I asked.

"Of course. It's Sears. It's good, but we don't have that kind on the place. I'll show you."

She showed us.

After the coffee we went back to headquarters and turned the knife over to lab. In half an hour they gave me the answer. No prints.

I was stuck again. I sent Johnny home and sat staring at the knife. A Sears and Roebuck knife. There were at least ten retail stores in and around Los Angeles. Each of them must sell thousands of identical knifes. It couldn't be traced—but I had to try.

The papers were still favorable. With the knife as a new clue, that would carry me through tomorrow. But if after that I didn't come up with something they'd sour.

I checked out for the day and drifted around a few spots. The problem stayed with me. It stayed with me through several straight shots. I gave up and went home.

V

IN THE MORNING I still hadn't thought of anything. I started driving in and then it broke for me. I stopped and called, releasing Johnny to work with someone else for a few days.

I hoped to hell I wasn't wasting my time. If the person who killed Larabee was not in the sanatorium then my search was meaningless. If he was a doctor, nurse, or attendant, then I had no business going through with it. My only chance was that the killer was a patient. If he was, I'd find him.

I got in the car and drove to the big Sears store at the corner of Olympic and Soto. It's the main store in southern Carlifornia.

I was lucky. It was Friday and most stores stay open until nine at night. I didn't use all the time but there wasn't much left when I found what I was looking for. I never realized how many people in hospitals bought at Sears. It had never occurred to me that it was significant.

I called the manager in and showed him the invoice and told him to keep it handy. He said they scheduled invoices for microfilming and then destroyed the original. After listening to me he decided to keep this one.

I had the drink I badly needed and then another. I went to the sanatorium. The night nurse was on duty but Mears was still around. I called her and told her what I wanted. Her eyes widened.

"We can't do that," she said. "She's going to surgery tomorrow. She knows what the routine is. She'll be upset if we depart from it."

"She'll be more upset if you don't get her out of there," I said.

She blinked and turned away. She knew what I meant. There weren't any nurses on duty so she went up and moved the patient herself.

This gave me a few minutes. I I lighted a cigarette and went outside. There was one other verification I had to make. I walked to the cottage and examined the end of the original infirmary. The missing detail was there. It had been there all the time and I hadn't seen it. I snuffed out the cigarette and went upstairs.

This was it.

Sally Craig was lying in bed when I came in. She didn't say anything. Mrs. Altman had been moved.

"Why did you do it that way?" I said. "You had to get a knife, but why from Sears? You should have sent for it from one of the other department stores. They carry standard brands. I wouldn't have known where to begin."

"They don't have catalogues," she said.

She knew. She'd known since yesterday when she saw us on the embankment. I sat down beside her. "How did you get out of here? Your roommate is a light sleeper."

She smiled faintly. "She says she is, but she's not. She's always complaining. Anyway, I do get seconal. I saved up three and gave them to her that night. She didn't want to say so in front of the nurse. Or maybe she didn't remember."

"Three yellow jackets? She couldn't have heard a thing." I wanted a cigarette but there was a no smoking rule in the infirmary. I sighed.

"Tell me Sally, how did you get out of here?"

"Bathroom privileges," she said. "There's only one nurse on duty upstairs at night. She wouldn't have been surprised to see me walking in the hall—but she didn't see me. I went to the stairs where the new infirmary joins the old. I was back in a few minutes."

She sat up. She was a nice looking girl. "Do you want the rest?"

"Might as well. One thing, does Walt know this?"

"He might wonder, but he doesn't know." She frowned, brushing her hair back. She didn't want to talk about Walt but she didn't seem to mind telling how she did it. "I waited until I heard the watchman leave after bringing the aspirin and then went down. I rattled the door and Larabee saw it was a woman and let me in. He had an exaggerated idea of how irresistible he was."

"This place is like a motel," I said.

"You'd be surprised. With some people it is. We get all kinds here, and they've got nothing else to do." She wiped her lips with a tissue. "He pulled down the shades and turned on the night light. I let him make love until I had my chance."

"He was taking off his pajama top," I said. "He couldn't do a thing with that over his head."

"I've been in and out of hospitals a lot," she said. "I knew just where the knife should go."

"You must have", I said. "But your robe got bloody."

"Yes, but I wasn't lying when you asked me about it. Some of the blood was mine. I hemorrhaged a little after I got back here. Anyway, I made sure he was dead. I knew I couldn't leave the knife, so I took it to the embankment and threw. I was hoping a kid would find it and take it home. I've seen groups of them come by on the way to the park."

"You didn't throw it far," I said. "It wasn't near the road where they could see it."

"I was getting weaker," she said. "I've been in the cottage until recently, and I built up my strength deliberately by walking around. But I didn't have much endurance."

To hear her tell it, it was easy to forget she had done quite well, considering that she was in bed in a sanatorium. Only the chance remembrance of the catalogue on the stand in her room had enabled me to track down who had ordered the knife.

"That's *how* you did it. Now why, Sally?" I said. "Are you in love with Walt Carroll?"

She turned and looked out the window over the trees at the lights of Los Angeles. It was a glittering beautiful panoply. They shouldn't have let her see it night after night.

"No," she said. "No tubercular has the right to love another patient. Someone else maybe, someone who's strong. But not another person like himself."

"They've got new drugs. They cure people."

"Not all of them," she said. "This is my second time here. I was advanced enough to be sent to the cottage and then they brought me back. If you don't know what that means ask the doctor." She pulled down the shade so she couldn't see out. "You want me to go on, don't you? You know that I can hear into Larabee's room through the ventilator."

I nodded. I had figured that out tonight. The day I'd heard Johnny talking to the lab man they hadn't been outside as I assumed. They were in the cottage. The other end of the ventilator faced the cottage window, and windows were always open in the sanatorium.

"Walt was doing fine until Larabee came out," said Sally. "Larabee recognized Walt while still in the infirmary—."

"Binoculars?" I asked.

"Yes. Nearly everyone has them. Larabee saw Walt around and asked to be transferred to the same cottage. The doctor saw no reason not to. I guess it wouldn't have made any difference. Walt started going downhill soon after. He wouldn't tell me why, though I kept asking. I knew there was some connection. He started leaving the sanatorium at night and drinking."

"That's why you were sure he'd

have an alibi," I said. "You figured he'd be at the bar."

"Yes," she said. "It's a sure way to die if you're a tubercular. Larabee in effect was killing him. I had to stop him before it was too late."

I needed a cigarette and a drink. I've never had a woman love me that much. I never will have.

"I got worse myself. I don't think that had anything to do with it. When I learned I had to come back to the infirmary I asked for this room. Remember, this isn't the first time I've been in this sanatorium. I know the place better than the head nurse."

"You listened in and found Larabee was blackmailing Walt. What I can't see is why it would hurt him to have it known he'd been in prison. His brother knew it. They wouldn't lose business because of it."

"There was another crime, before the one he was sentenced for. They never did find who did it," said Sally. "It taught him a lesson. With his brother's help he was going straight."

Sure, that would do it. Larabee had somehow found out the details and threatened to tip off the authorities in the east if he wasn't paid. The brothers could fight extradition but it would be touch and go whether they'd make it. In any event the cost and publicity would ruin them and they'd have to sell out. Walt would be adrift again, exactly when he needed help and stability.

"What was the other crime?" I asked.

I looked up to see Sally staring at me with blank hatred, a tissue pressed against her lips. "I don't know," she said. "I didn't hear them say."

I was glad she didn't have a knife. She had killed once to protect her man. She wasn't going to tell me or anybody. "Never mind the question," I said. "I don't care about petty charges. I'm in homicide."

"Thanks," she said, smiling faintly over the tissue. Her eyes were dark. "Do you think they'll send me to the gas chamber?"

"I don't see why they should," I said. "It's bad for your lungs."

NEXT MONTH **THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET**

DEAD ON THE HOUR

by BRETT HALLIDAY

SUMMER SHAKESPEARE . . . WITH A MYSTERY DEATH CAST

DEATH OF A LIGHT-HEARTED LADY

In the green woodland setting the crumpled body seemed ghastly . . . as if that real-life tragedy had stripped all illusion from the world of the theatre.

by **RUTH MALONE**

THE FIELDS FALL gently behind the Wayside Theatre to the banks of Coldpound Creek. There the gray Pennsylvania rock drops into icy waters hurrying to their meeting with the Delaware. October sun fell this morning onto gray rock, green trees, saffron fields. Fell as well on the crumpled body of Miss Mary Gregg, half immersed.

Mary Gregg, late of the Wayside Theatre, was wearing a flannel skirt and matching cashmere sweater, a camelhair coat which floated along the water, pinned by her shoulders. One foot was doubled under her, and russet curls fanned out into the eddies of the stream. She must, thought Andy Pine, have been spectacular. He shivered on the bank above her body, and turned to Robert Dean beside him.

The young man chattered too. He had arrived, near-hysterical, at Andy's door fifteen minutes ago, and waited while the lawyer found trousers and topcoat, and donned wading boots. Not that he had any intention of going into the water just now.

"You called the police?" he asked Robert Dean.

"While you dressed," Dean answered. "What do you think?" His

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anxiety was in his shaking hands as well as his voice.

"She fell, or somebody pushed her. Skull fracture probably, though she could have drowned. Who did you say she was?"

"Mary Gregg." Dean looked at the awkward heap in the water and then away again, quickly. "She was one of our best actresses. What on earth we'll do now, with *Taming of the Shrew* only weeks away I do not know. And don't ask me what she's doing here; I truly do not know. We rehearsed late last night. It isn't going well —I guess it's all right to say that— and Jake Ryder kept us at it until after midnight. Usually we sleep till noon, after a night like that. But I got up early and started down to the Theatre, to run through my lines privately, before we all begin again. If we do. But about Mary . . ." He paused.

"Yes?" Andy lit a cigarette and inhaled. "You were on your way to Wayside Theatre. Is this the only way?"

"No. You can go by the road, which is direct, or take this path through the woods. It runs to the theatre from the farmhouse, where we all live, and it has the advantage of privacy. Mostly I kept my head down, muttering lines as I went, you know. But for some reason I looked up. Or down, really. And saw . . ." Dean gestured delicately and looked away.

"Then you came for me?"

Dean stared at him, frowning.

"Certainly not. I found Jake Ryder. He's our director. Founder really. Nobody else was up. He sent me to you because we don't have a phone in the farmhouse. To keep us from being disturbed, you know. Also, of course, to save money. Repertory theatre isn't exactly Broadway, as you must know. Any way I didn't want to come back down this way again. and your house is nearby and both of us felt we needed somebody—respectable—if you'll forgive me."

Andy grinned. "The police don't always think lawyers are so respectable, Son. Anyway I'd say what you needed most was a doctor. Though it's too late, I can see that. Well, tell me, did Jake have any ideas about what Miss Gregg was doing down here throwing herself into the Creek, or getting pushed in?"

"Nobody ever knew why Mary did *any*thing," Dean went on, with his curiously delicate emphasis. "Excepting her acting, of course." He was being scrupulously fair about that. "She was a wonder, on stage. Incandescent. But offstage—well, sometimes I think she just went on acting and didn't know she wasn't behind footlights. She seemed to like to have her life . . . well . . . messy."

He sounded reluctant as well as distasteful, and giving up, began to work on his nails with an emory

board he found in the pocket of his creamy flannel jacket.

They waited a few moments in silence, and then heard behind them the slow footsteps of Jake Ryder, the Theatre's gray, dynamic founder-director. Ryder and Pine shook hands, neighbors and mutual admirers, and then looked simultaneously at the girl in the water.

"Too damned bad. Too damned bad." Ryder's whisper was hoarse and his eyes, squinting in the morning sun, were moist. "God knows why it had to happen now, with all the trouble we're having anyway."

"She was your leading lady?"

Ryder nodded. "In this production, yes. We're doing *The Shrew,* and she made a fine fiery Katherine. But we've had nothing but trouble since we began putting it into rehearsal. Trouble over the casting, rehearsals haywire, personal vendettas."

Ryder groaned. "I've been sorry I ever decided on it. It isn't one of Shakespeare's best plays, and I've always believed the world wouldn't suffer much if nobody ever put another *Shrew* on the boards again. But the funny part is, everybody in the company wanted to go on with it. Their own way, of course; their own interpretations . . . Lord."

"Will you call it off now?"

Ryder slanted a glance in his direction and another at Dean. "No. We can get on with it. Mary's understudy, Margie Rydell, was perfectly acceptable and can pick up where she left off. If only I could get all of them to pull in the same direction. Last night I kept them at it long past midnight, and I called for an early rehearsal for today."

"How many of them went straight home after rehearsal, do you know?"

"No, I don't. I went straight back to the house, myself, and right to bed. I could hear the others trailing in, making coffee, talking. But I didn't come down and can't tell who was there and who wasn't."

"The police will want to know," Andy said. "Mary Gregg obviously didn't go home to bed. Or if she went back to the house, she came down here some time later. And how many others were missing—well, that will be part of the investigation. Somebody may know what she was doing here, even if they didn't see her fall in. Here comes the cops."

Andy Pine turned and greeted the two uniformed men clomping through the trees. "Hello, Manny. How're you, Joe?"

They nodded, muttering his name but with their minds obviously on the body in the water. Then they descended, slipping a little. Two of the men on the bank watched the examination; the third turned his handsome face away.

It lasted only a few minutes. Then the policemen stood up, wiping their hands on their pants and squinting up the bank.

"Fell or was pushed," said Manny Weiss. "About—let's say eight feet. Or shall we measure?" He did not wait for his partner's answer but took a steel tape measure from his pocket. After another minute he nodded, satisfied. "Yep. About eight feet. Sharp rocks, too. No wonder her head cracked like an egg."

"Dead when she fell?" Andy called from above.

"Can't tell. The doctor will know. We're just patrolmen. The detectives will be along. When they finish their coffee." Weiss sounded distant.

"Is it Jack Danney's case?" Andy asked.

Weiss shrugged, and then both he and Joe began climbing back up the bank.

"Jack Danney's the County detective," Manny answered when he reached the top. "If he can he'll write it off as suicide, and if he can't he'll get around to investigating it. If it doesn't interfere with his lunch. Or his dinner. Or his night's sleep. Well, you guys better stick around till Danney and his boys get here."

"We will. Is it all right if we go up to the house for some coffee?"

"Sure. Just make sure nobody leaves there till the Big Shots take over."

They nodded, putting their notebooks back in their pockets, and took stances, arms akimbo, on the bank. Ryder and Pine, with Robert Dean between them, started up the path to the farmhouse, its chimneys visible above the trees.

He's nervous, Andy thought as Ryder's massive body stumbled, cursing softly. This is tough for him. The Wayside is his life and his wife. And this is not the kind of publicity their new production needs.

"Do you think Miss Gregg could've got up early this morning, and ran down to do a little private rehearsing, and stumbled?" Andy called ahead of him to the other two, mostly to have something to say.

Robert Dean's blond head shook violently. "No. She wore tights and ballet slippers to rehearse. These are the clothes she was wearing last night when she left to keep . . . a date."

"We'll have to find out whom the date was with," Ryder's voice shook slightly as they reached the door and he opened it.

The cool, amused voice picked him up at the end of his lines.

"With me, of course. Everybody who was there last night knows that, Jake. She went out on a date with me, and then she ran away and left me. I never found out why."

The speaker was darkly good-

looking, his eyes as amused as his voice. He leaned easily against the seventeenth century fireplace in the kitchen, wearing blue jeans and a woodsman's shirt. He smiled at Andy Pine—the smile for some reason vaguely annoyed the lawyer—and went on, addressing Jake Ryder.

"What happened to Mary, by the way? Everybody's sitting around the living-room wondering, and I think it's about time somebody broke the news."

"You don't know?" Andy sounded ruder than he'd meant to.

"No, no," the man's voice could not have been more gentle if Andy had been a freckle-faced boy. "You see, we were waked up this morning and told to come downstairs and stay put. And Mary wasn't there. When I saw her last she was very angry with me. This was, say, close to two a.m. She ran out of the Waybrook Inn toward these woods, and either met somebody there or hid in the woods until I stopped looking for her. I gave up after about an hour, and went to bed. And she isn't here this morning. I want to know what happened."

"So do we. She's lying down there in the creek behind the theatre, with her skull crushed." Ryder's voice was harsh. "Ted, this is Andy Pine, the lawyer up the road. Andy, Ted Marshall."

The two men made a stab at manners, missing by a fraction. Marshall turned to the director. "How did it happen?" he asked.

"We don't know." The old man sounded weary. "How much did she have to drink before she ran away, Ted?"

"Not much. You know Mary. She liked to see other people drink because they lost control and that amused her. But she never lost control herself. I don't believe she ever finished the highball she ordered with her sandwich. No, I know she didn't."

"You were fighting again."

Marshall's mouth twisted, not unattractively.

"We were fighting like hell. As usual. But there was something about this fight that was different. I almost hate to say this—but it was as if Mary planned to fight with me, for some ulterior reason of her own. Like the running away bit. That was almost spontaneous. But somehow not quite. She meant to stage it this way. and she did. Now I guess I'll never know why, or where, or with whom . . ." He stopped, looking down into the fire.

Andy moved onto a bench beside the big pine table and took the mug of coffee Ryder handed him.

"Where is everybody?" The big gray man ran his hands across his face as if brushing away cobwebs.

"Sitting around the living-room, taking each other's pulses and try-

ing on correct attitudes," Marshall said.

"Get them in here before the detectives come, will you, Ted? I want to talk to them."

Marshall gave him a long considering look. "You think she didn't just fall in? You think somebody . . . ?"

"I don't know. She could have, of course. Especially if she was running away from you, mad, and didn't see where she was going."

Marshall turned to Pine. "But you don't think it's as simple as that. Do you?"

Pine met the curious, flecked eyes—penetrating eyes. Hostile eyes? "What difference does it make what I think?"

He was annoyed with himself because he was unable to repress the aggression in his own voice. What right had this man, this actor, to provoke such emotions? He was about to begin all over again when Marshall turned silently and went down the corridor to the living-room.

Ryder put his hand on Pine's arm. "Don't be like that, Andy. He's—difficult. Impossible, maybe. But he's one hell of a fine actor. That's all he really cares about. Acting. This theatre."

"And women," Andy's voice was positive.

Ryder thought a minute, smiling. "Well. Maybe women in general. Women in audiences always. Women when they're playing opposite him and he thinks they need a little help in sustaining a mood. But nothing permanent. Not at all what you're thinking."

"I take it his permanent love affair is with himself." Now why the hell do I sound so huffy, Andy wondered as he spoke.

Soberly Ryder shook his head. "No. Don't make that mistake about him, either. He values himself, all right. The way he would value any other important piece of property. But his permanent love affair, as I happen to know, is with the theatre. With acting. As a profession, and as a way of life."

Jake's voice became more emphatic. "His own and everybody else's acting. He's obsessed. Sex he considers some kind of infantile aberration in which he occasionally indulges when it doesn't interfere with his theatrical commitments. Not like Mary. She used it like a weapon and she never thought it an aberration."

"If only he didn't use such beastly language, and say such slanderous things," Robert Dean's voice burst in, and they stared at him. He had his face in his hands and his shoulders shook.

Andy raised his eyebrows and started to speak, but Jake gestured and he kept quiet. They were sitting like that, without speaking, when they heard footsteps outside the door and at the same time the voices of the acting company proceeding down the corridor.

II

JACK DANNEY, the County detective, nodded at Andy Pine, less enthusiastically at Jake Ryder, and then turned to confront the theatrical group. Andy, trying to keep his mind on the business at hand, got a blurred impression of leotards, long hair and fiery nails from the women; of sandals and turtlenecks from the men.

Danney was tall and spare, and chary of words. He plunged right in.

Marshall repeated his story, with fuller details. He and Mary Gregg, who were playing Petruchio and Katherine in the play, had been alternately quarreling and dating for some months. Last night, after rehearsal, they had left together for Waybrook Inn, where each had ordered a drink and a sandwich. Before the order could be brought, however, they had begun to quarrel, and after a few bites of her sandwich Miss Gregg had leapt to her feet, donned her camel-hair coat and slammed out the door of the Inn's Hickory Bar.

"A beautiful exit, if I may say so," the actor said in his lazy voice. "Marred a little by the fact that it was planned rather than spontaneous. Everybody there saw her, and heard her. Her voice carried wonderfully."

"This was the last you saw of her?"

"Yes. Not by choice. It was late and I was concerned about how she would get back here. As efficient as the police are, these can be lonely roads."

He did not pause to stress the point by looking at the detective, Andy noticed, but continued with deathly seriousness. "I got into my car, after I'd paid the bill, and drove very slowly down the Coldpound Road, trying to find her. No matter how mad she was at me, I felt she would rather have a ride home than walk that road after midnight. But I was wrong, as it turned out. She must have hidden somewhere in the trees beside the road. Or been picked up, according to plan."

"So you didn't find her."

"No. Finally I gave it up and came home and went to bed."

"You were angry with her."

"Furious." His voice was without inflection.

"You don't know, then, what she was doing down by the Creek later that night—or morning, rather?"

Marshall shook his head "Knowing Mary, I find it hard to believe she was down there . . . alone."

Protesting mutters from the theatre group were silenced by the detective's next question.

"You think she went down there to meet somebody? In the woods? In October?"

"It would make such a good story to tell, next day, you see," Marshall said smoothly.

This time the sobs could not be stilled. They came from Doris Wilson, a plump, soberly dressed young woman, sitting next to Jake Ryder.

"I think this is horrible." Doris's voice could hardly be heard above the sobs. "Isn't there some other way? Do we have to go on listening to these cruel insinuations? Why can't we behave like decent people?"

Jack Danney was unmoved. "You think he did it?" Danney jerked a thumb toward Ted Marshall, who tightened his lips and said nothing.

Doris Wilson shook her head. "No. No, no. I don't think he did it. It's just that he's . . . enjoying this, damn him. Maybe she fell in the Creek. Maybe she had more to drink than he remembers. Maybe she went down to the theatre to get something, and tripped over a tree stump. I just wish he'd behave like a decent human being instead of an exhibitionist for once in his life."

"For *heaven's* sakes!" This time it was Robert Dean who burst in. He leaned across Jake Ryder to pat the girl's gray shoulders, hunched under a bulky sweater, and glared like an angry rabbit at the detectives. "Can't you see she's unnerved? Doris was Mary's best friend. She's had a bad enough shock, without having to listen to all this . . . nastiness."

His glare at Marshall was met with a slight grin. "Of course Ted didn't do it. He wouldn't tell such a darn silly story if he had. But I don't see why all of us have to submit to this kind of inquisition."

"Just because somebody *may* have been murdered?" The little thin detective squinted speculatively at Dean. "Well, I'll tell you, Son. We don't want to cause nobody any trouble. But we've a job to do. We have to talk to everyone who knows anything about this girl—where she was last night, who she was with. We'll do it one at a time, in private. Then maybe nobody will have cause to get upset. We'll start with Marshall, here, and when he's done I'll call you in one by one. That all right with everybody?"

His eyes swept the group.

"I just want to say one thing." Margie Rydell, the pretty little blonde, who spoke from her perch on a red kitchen stool twisted a heavy gold ring around her finger. nervously. Her chin was squared. "I think all of us had better give up this 'speak no evil of the dead' routine, if you're going to get anywhere with this. All of us knew Mary—and we all know that Ted is right about her. She'd have met anybody she pleased, at any time, any place. We aren't going to make any progress pretending otherwise. Nobody is in a better position to know this than Ted." Margie glared viciously at that smooth-haired young man, who

returned her stare calmly and without anger.

The solid Doris sprang to her feet, with Robert Dean close behind. Then Ryder's voice cut sharply across the room.

"That will do. All of you. Margie, that was unnecessary. Doris, go up and find some aspirin. Bob, sit down. We are going to cooperate with the police, all of us. The reputation of the Wayside is at stake here."

In the silence which followed the group stood up and shuffled out. Margie looked remorseful but stubborn; Doris unhappy; Dean petulant. Marshall remained behind with Jack Danney, who settled down at the table with his notebooks. Andy Pine rose, with Ryder, and stretched his arms.

Danney nodded at him. "You better get along to that office of yours, Pine. Who you representing here, anyway?"

"I'm just a neighbor," Pine told him, grinning slightly. "Not ambulance chasing. They used my phone this morning, and I came along to see what was the trouble."

"You know this girl?"

"No. My loss, of course."

"Hmmm. Well, take it easy, Pine. We'll take you next, Mr. Ryder. After we finish with . . . Marshall, is it?"

The actor bowed. Ryder and Andy left the room by the kitchen door and emerged into the bright sunlight. They shook hands.

"If you need me for anything . . ." Andy started to say.

The director's lips twisted. "Thanks. We certainly may need some legal advice. But I appreciate what you've done already. This is going to be rough, any way you look at it."

"Danney's a pretty decent guy," Andy told him. "He won't tell the papers more than he has to. And he isn't going to lacerate anybody's feelings."

Ryder sighed. "Still, unless they find somebody who saw her trip and fall, we're in for a nasty few days. But thanks, anyway. You'll hear from me."

Pine waved, and hurried down the road to a shower and a quick change.

III

ANDY PINE found Pearl Crandall typing away like sixty. The mail was slit, and memoranda of half a dozen phone calls papered his desk. He ignored them.

"Come on in, Pearl," he said. "I want to talk to you." He held the office door open for her. She sat down, her hands busy with the stenographic notebook. He didn't know how to begin, though, and looked out the window. Across the street, the courthouse gleamed like a wedding cake. An occasional figure ascended the steps, briefcase in hand. Civil court was in session this week and next. He had sev-

eral cases on the dockets himself, and they should have been on his mind.

Instead he said, "I want to ask you a question, Pearl. It's a—well, a 'for-instance' kind of question. Suppose you had a fight with Bob, one night, at the Waybrook Inn. You got mad at him and ran away, down the Coldpound Road. It's night, mind you. What would you have been up to?"

Pearl smiled demurely. "I'd have been cheating on my husband, that's what I'd have been up to. I'd have been meeting somebody on Coldpound Road. If I didn't know somebody was going to meet me there, I'd have headed for Front Street and the lights of the town. Where I could get a taxi, or a bus."

"Oh?"

Pearl nodded. "That's right," she said gently. "No matter how mad a girl was, she wouldn't go tearing around in those woods late at night unless she was darned sure somebody was waiting for her there to lend a good right arm. And if you mean that redhead from the Wayside Theatre, there isn't much question what *she* was up to, Andy. Just . . . with whom. It could have been lots of guys."

He stared at her.

"All over town already, hey? Where did you hear about it—at the Gilmore Street Luncheonette?

"Right. The call came into the sheriff's office just before Millie took off for her morning coffee. After I drove Bob to the Hospital, I went in to the luncheonette for breakfast, and got it hot off the wire. You know Millie."

He knew Millie. He sighed, deeply, and riffled the papers on his desk. "Well, all right. What does the Lunchcounter Espionage think happened?"

She thought a minute, frowning.

"She must have been pretty wild, Andy. Had a lot of boy friends, from all I hear. Some at the theatre, some around town. She was not unknown over there . . ." Pearl waved toward the courthouse. "Delivered a few votes, now and then, for The Old Man. She was a busy one. However, her number one boy friend was supposed to be her leading man at the theatre. Ted Marshall. You know him?"

Pine nodded. "He was supposed to be head man in real life, too?"

"They were seen together a lot. Quarreling, usually. They made quite a sight, I'm told. Both handsome, and with voices which carried over any kind of noise. It was worth three dollars a seat just to hear them dissecting each other, Millie tells me."

"Do they think he did it, down at the luncheonette?"

"No, they don't. It's funny. Everybody thinks she was up to something—carrying on in secret.

She was that kind of a girl, remember."

"You don't list Marshall as a suspect, then?"

She smiled at him, warmly. "I've seen him a lot, at the Wayside. No, I don't list him as a suspect. He makes a romantic kind of hero, though."

"He's a heel, if you want my honest opinion," Pine said.

Her smile was wider this time, tolerant. "Men don't usually like him," Pearl said placidly, gathering her notes and preparing to leave. "If you're about finished, I want to type the Carter will. The old lady will be in at three, to sign it."

"If you hear anything else, let me know."

She paused at the doorway. "She had a lot of enemies, you know," she said slowly.

"Oh? Who, for instance?"

"Women. Every woman who met her." She nodded, and returned to her desk, her shoulders held straight.

He tried, half-heartedly, to get some work done, but he wasn't succeeding very well. It was almost time for lunch when Pearl entered again, looking important.

"Mr. Buzzell to see you, Mr. Pine."

He looked up, impatiently, and saw behind her the husky, six-foot figure of a leading member of the Theatre's acting company. He rose and shook hands, and Pearl closed the door behind her. They sat down.

"I'm Larry Buzzell," the young actor was nervous, but under control. Handsome, but not quite in the same impressive way that Ted Marshall was handsome, Andy thought. He waited.

Buzzell took time to light a cigaret, wave out the match, and then inhale. At last he spoke. "Jake told me I'd better talk to you. I need advice."

"Legal advice?"

"I . . . don't know. That's what I want to see you about. I haven't talked to Mr. Danney yet. But I talked to Jake, and he told me to come down and see you before the detectives started in on me."

Silence simmered between them momentarily, and then Andy said, "You were the man Mary met in the woods."

Young Buzzell gave a long sigh, half pain and half relief. "Actually, I was waiting for her in the theatre, not in the woods, Mr. Pine. Downstairs, in her dressing room."

"Tell me about it."

"Well, it was her idea. That is . . . to meet me that way. She seemed to enjoy the idea of going off with Ted and staging a fight and then meeting me, after we'd arranged to meet beforehand. There was something a little childish about her at times. She liked to play games. Of course, I had a

very good reason for wanting to keep quiet about the whole thing."

"Yes?"

The young actor paused, but went on firmly enough. "I'm a married man, Mr. Pine. A *happily* married man—in spite of what I'm telling you now. I have a wonderful wife, and two fine children, and I love them and I'd give anything I own to keep them from finding out about this. In my profession, it isn't always easy to avoid this kind of entanglement. But I succeeded—until Mary came along. She was a girl who knew exactly what she wanted, and somehow . . . she made it sound perfectly innocent and perfectly safe. If you know what I mean."

His voice became almost pleading. "As if it were a private thing, just involving the two of us—with nobody ever finding out, and nobody getting hurt. I guess I bought that because I didn't want to see that even if she hadn't died—she wasn't the kind of girl who would even seriously try to avoid the limelight. Well. Anyway, I met her there, some time close to two a.m. Don't ask me how she got through the woods alone. She had nerve, I'll say that for her. We were there about an hour, and I left first. She told me to go, and I did. That way nobody would hear us come in together, and get up to investigate. I didn't even hear her come in. I was too tired to listen, I suppose. I fell asleep, and that's all I knew until this morning."

"Is your wife living with you at the farmhouse?"

"No. No. If she were this never would have happened. You see, Jake doesn't allow it. We own a little split-level bungalow, over in Waybrook Hollow. I live at home except when we're rehearsing a new production. Then Jake wants us around, day and night, until every piece of business comes out right. So I stay over, and return home when the play is on the boards, or between productions."

"So you went back to your room, and went to sleep. You had no way of knowing whether some third person might not have been lurking in the woods? Or even whether she might not have tripped and fallen?"

Buzzell gave him a narrow look. "I didn't see or hear anybody, if that's what you mean. I'm not really heel enough to leave a girl out alone in the woods, if it seems dangerous. And somehow I can't believe that she tripped and fell. It would be convenient, but . . . she was pretty controlled. And not at all drunk."

Pine hesitated. Then: "Your wife? If she had known about you and Mary—"

"No." Buzzell's voice was tired but very earnest. "If she had known, she wouldn't have waited around outside, you can depend on that. In the second place—

well, she may want to murder *me* when this comes out. But she stays away from the theatre altogether when I'm rehearsing. She certainly wouldn't have been lurking down there at that hour, with the children at home.

"Oh, hell. Look, Pine. I'm perfectly sure it wasn't my wife. Let's not make this tougher for her than it has to be. Will you go with me while I see the detectives?"

"Let's get it clear in our own minds, first. Then we'll talk to Danney. You won't have any trouble with him, by the way—if you're telling the truth. He's fair, and he's decent. But he's thorough. And you have a pretty good motive, you know."

"None better." Buzzell's eyes were tormented. "Mary would have been in a wonderful position to make my life a hell. She knew I loved my wife, and it seemed to irritate her. Almost, at times, to infuriate her. Still, I didn't do it. Do you believe me?"

Andy smiled at him. "I believe you. So will Danney, if you keep nothing back. This moves us a little closer to finding out who did push her over, though. Before we hunt up Danney I want to ask you one other question. Do you think Ted Marshall could have followed her back there, after the fight, and waited until you left?"

"No, I don't. You wouldn't, either, if you knew Ted better. Ted might have killed her in full view of an audience, if he didn't think she was projecting properly. But over this? Never. He would have been vastly amused, I'm quite sure, because of my reputation as a happily married man. It would have confirmed his opinion that there is no such animal. But I'm as sure he didn't do it as that I didn't."

"But it was done. And sometimes we can't be too dogmatic about human capabilities. Let's call on Jack Danney."

IV

THE INTERVIEW took up most of the rest of the day. Danney sent out for sandwiches, and they went back and forth over the case, back and forth.

Danney wasn't, ostensibly, doubting Larry Buzzell's story. But he was checking it until it was proof. Finally he let them go, with the usual orders about sticking around. They parted company at the bottom of the courthouse steps.

"I won't try to thank you," said Larry Buzzell, extending his hand. "In fact, I don't even know how I'm going to pay you."

"We won't worry about that just now. Do you feel better?"

"Much."

"Fine," Andy said. "Now go along back to the Theatre. I'll be over tonight, after supper. I want to watch one of those rehearsals of Jake's."

"Come for supper," Buzzell grinned. "We're even funnier to watch when we're acting off-stage."

"Maybe I'll do that." He waved, and ducked across the street to his office.

Pearl Crandall was beginning to file things away, signifying the end of her day, if not of his. He stopped in the doorway, thinking.

"What are you and Bob up to tonight?" he asked.

"Eating the leftovers from yesterday's roast. Why?"

"Nothing. I was just thinking—how would you like to have a drink with me, before I go on out to Wayside? I have some ideas I want to try out."

"You come and have it with us," he said firmly. "Bob's bushed after a day on the children's wards. Meantime, you'd better call Mrs. Carter. She was in, and left—in a huff."

"I'll do that. You run along, then, Pearl. I'll see you at the apartment."

And he returned, momentarily, to the disposal of the Carter millions.

Bob Crandall met him at the door of the little apartment, a cold drink in his hand. A small, owlish man with an infinite calm, he was in his second year of residence in pediatrics at the local hospital. They shook hands, and nobody said anything until another round of drinks had been poured. Then Andy relaxed, stretching his long legs. Bob grinned.

"What's the idea of getting my old lady mixed up in murder, anyway? Do you have so little business that you go out of your way to dig it up?"

"My neighbors. My good, fascinating, glamorous, gossip-inspiring neighbors," Pine told him, grimacing. "It would have interested me even if they hadn't drawn me in from the beginning. But now, you see, we have a client."

"And he's innocent." Pearl stood framed in the doorway, the about-to-be converted roast in her hand. "He's a darling."

"That doesn't necessarily make him innocent," her husband told her.

"But he is. He's in a tough spot. But he could never have committed a brutal crime. Any more than the Marshall man would."

Pine sighed. "Crandall, I think your wife likes men, don't you? Okay, then, Bright Eyes. If neither of them did it—who did? Have you any theories?

She thought a minute, seriously. "Well. My bet would be somebody who hasn't emerged yet. Say, some little pipsqueak of a man who had a yen for this redhead, and couldn't make the grade. Rage. You know. Rejection."

"You've been reading too many mystery stories. How about a jealous woman?"

"You mean Margie Rydell.

Bannion. She—" But he could not go on.

"Where is she?" snapped Rollison. "Hurry!"

"I don't know. I swear to you—"

"Give me her address," Tollison said, his voice harsh.

"He doesn't know where she lives!" the woman screeched, as if she were as frightened as her companion. "We know the house, but we don't know the address. That's the truth!"

The Toff loosed his grip on Lawson's father. "Where is the house?" he demanded, a little more calmly. "How far away is it?"

"In Wimbledon," the woman answered, while the man muttered as if trying to confirm what she said. "We could take you there," she went on, almost eagerly.

"All right, let's go," Rollison said. "Just put an overcoat on. There's no time to put on more clothes."

In three minutes he was able to hustle the man and the woman down the stairs. He reached the car, and switched on the engine while the others climbed in, the woman beside him, the man at the back.

He flashed past Putney Bridge, and sent the car hurtling up Putney Hill. The old man began to talk, to defend and to excuse himself.

He had been forced into helping in a plot against Clare Bannion. She was next-of-kin to an Australian who had died after making a uranium strike which was now worth a fortune. She had not known of the strike, but two members of another branch of her family, her own next-of-kin, had learned of it somehow.

It was important for them to find out whether Clare knew about the inheritance. That was where Jack had come in. He had struck up an acquaintance with Clare, with the carefully planned intention of winning her complete confidence.

"I could see he was falling in love with her," Lawson said hoarsely. "I warned him, but I never dreamed they would resort to murder. I thought they'd put pressure on Jack to marry Clare and get his hands on the money. He helped them with a couple of burglary jobs, because of me, so they had something to hold over us. But—Jack fell in love with Clare," Lawson repeated helplessly. "He wouldn't let them hurt her."

Jack had not known that murder had been intended until a few hours ago. There had been a quarrel and Jack had run away from his father and from Clare's cousins. Lawson had come home—to bed but not to sleep.

"If I'd known they meant murder I'd have gone straight to the police," he said. "I swear to you I would."

The Toff neither knew nor

cared whether the old man's protestations were true, or false.

Beyond the crown of Putney Hill, the woman at his side said: "Straight on. It's the first turning on the left."

The Toff reached the turning and swung into a street of large houses standing in their own grounds. He saw a car outside the second nearest one.

"That's the house!" the woman cried. There was no uncertainty in her voice.

Rollison swung the car through the gate posts and felt the near side wing scrape. But it did not slow him down. He put his hand on the horn and kept it there. The deep note filled the night.

The front door was standing open. Looking around, the Toff saw a man standing by the porch, gun in hand, and another at a window on the first floor.

He did not slacken his speed, but drove straight at the first man. The woman screamed, while terror turned the man's face into a gargoyle. Within a yard of the great stone pillars, Rollison jammed on the brakes.

He saw the gunman trying to get away, saw him struck by a bumper, and fall. He tensed himself against the shock of the impact, and as the car stopped, its front wings crumpling, he opened the door and leapt out.

The first man was crouching in fear. The house was in darkness.

CLARE BANNION awoke without any positive sense of alarm. Some noise had awakened her, but she had no idea what kind of sound it was or where it had originated. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep again. In another moment the sound came again. She heard it repeatedly—a scratching at the door of her bedroom.

She sat up in bed, saw the handle turning, the door opening slowly. A heavyset man stepped in. In the street lamp-light, she recognised him as a cousin whom she customarily met once or twice a year. But she had never seen such an expression of deadly malice as there was on his face now.

She knew, instantly, he had come to kill her. There was no other explanation for the gun in his hand, or for the coldness and brutal mockery in his stare.

"Mick," she gasped. "Mick, what are you doing here? What do you want?"

He did not answer, but stepped towards her, brandishing his gun. He was breathing hard, as if breathing caused him pain.

Suddenly there was the roar of a powerful engine, the screeching of brakes and a crash which seemed to shake the house from cellar to attic.

Mick ran to the window. Clare scrambled out of bed, picked up a chair and flung it at him, filled with the courage of despair. She heard a shot, but felt nothing. She

the pretty blonde understudy? Maybe."

"I was thinking of Buzzell's wife, really."

"Nonsense." Pearl was brisk. "You don't think so, either, Andy. You're just fishing."

She walked to the coffee table and poured herself another short drink. "Here," she said, lifting her glass. "I'm going to drink to the Buzzells, and their happy marriage."

The men looked at her, but she was not smiling.

V

SUPPER AT THE Wayside was chaotic. But the food was very good. Pine, accustomed to dining in solitude, found that the high-pitched voices and the controlled tensions left him without much appetite for the Italian casserole. He ate a lot of good, crusty bread, and drank some wine, and watched the performance. They knew he was watching and put on an excellent performance.

Later, watching all of the actors on stage, he felt closer to normal. And perhaps they are, too, he told himself. Affairs in Padua began to take shape, slowly, patchily, and with a great deal of time out for discussions. At last though, even to his unaccustomed eyes, the cast began to pull together.

Margie Rydell, nervous to begin with, drew strength and competence with every repetition. He found himself thinking that Mary Gregg must indeed have been a magnificent actress if she had won out over this one. He kept looking around, sitting beside Jake Ryder. But somebody was missing.

Finally the director called a halt.

"Take half an hour," he bellowed. "Rest. Get some coffee. And be back here at half past nine. You're doing fine," he added.

And they broke up, in smiles.

Ted Marshall loped down the aisle, with the new Katherine on his arm.

"We are going up to the Inn for a drink, and some arguments," he told Jake, ignoring Andy completely. "When we come back you'll see a performance that will stir your non-existent soul. Right, Darling?"

"Oh, Ted. You're *awful*." Margie sighed, happily, and they disappeared.

Ryder laughed. "You see what I mean? Strasburg has one Method —but Marshall has his own. She'll be great."

Andy was just about to ask a question when Larry Buzzell came into the Wayside through the back door, his manner concerned.

"Can I have the keys to the station wagon, Jake?" he called. "Doris wants to be driven to the drugstore. She wants to drive herself, but I said I'd take her. I don't think she should drive."

"Sure." Jake crossed the stage toward him, reaching into his pocket.

"Wait a minute," Andy said. "Where has Doris been?"

"In bed," the young actor replied. "We called the doctor for her after the detectives left. She was knocked out. He left her a prescription for sleeping pills. I offered to get them. But she wants to go herself. Says she's been indoors too long."

"I'll take her. I want to talk to her, anyway."

Jake Ryder looked at him. When he answered it was indirect. "She's indispensable around here. Tonight's muddle would have been straightened out in half the time if she had been backstage, managing things, the way she usually does. I didn't realize how much I leaned on her until she wasn't here. And if she needs sleep—"

"I won't hurt her," Andy told him, his hand on the man's shoulder. "She shouldn't drive, and I've been waiting to see her. Believe me, Jake—I have Doris Wilson's interests at heart. And yours."

Silently the old man handed the keys to Pine, and walked away.

"I'd like to come," Buzzell said stubbornly.

"No," Andy said firmly, and walked out the door to the station wagon, in which a huddled figure waited without words. Instead of getting into the driver's seat Andy handed the keys to the girl, and walked around to the other side. Surprised, but still without words, Doris started the car and they rolled slowly into Coldpound Road.

After about a half mile, Andy said thoughtfully, "I can't let you do it, you know."

Doris looked at him sidewise, and her lip started to tremble. But she refused to answer. He went on, staring ahead.

"It isn't like you, either, to take this way out. If you stick it out, and have a good lawyer, you'd get manslaughter, maybe. But not first degree murder. Not with her reputation. The provocation—"

The car shrieked to a stop by the side of the road, and Andy gripped the door-handle. Doris put her head between her hands and the long, harsh sobs nearly tore her sturdy body apart.

At last she looked up, her face drained of all color.

"But Larry," she said. "I thought and thought, and I couldn't see how it could all come out without Larry getting terribly hurt too."

"It's because he's so much a part of it in your own mind," Andy told her with kindness. "Isn't that it? You are in love with him?" he added gently.

She nodded. "But not . . . that way. Not . . . her way. I love him desperately. But I admire him

and look up to him. And I wouldn't have anything happen to him for the world. That's why . . ." She drew a long breath. "I heard him go out last night. I got up thinking if there was something he wanted down there I could help him get it. And when I got there I heard . . . her. I waited around outside. I was stunned, I guess. I think I was sick, somewhere there in the woods. Then he came out. And in a little while, she came out. Singing.

"I stopped her, to ask her please not to do to him what she'd done to the others. Talk about it, that is. Make him a kind of joke. And she just laughed at me. She made fun of me, and of him, too. She said he was—just like all the others. A complete fool. And that if I weren't so fat, so serious . . ."

"Yes?"

"I tried to slap her then, and she ducked. But she got mad, and struck out at me, and I saw red for a moment. I don't know whether I actually knocked her over, or whether she ducked and slipped. But she fell. She didn't even scream. She must have struck her head. I—I didn't go down to look.

"I just let her lie there, and went back to my room. And sat up all night, in a kind of daze. Then today—I wanted to tell the detectives. I tried. But I couldn't see how to do it without involving Larry. So, when the doctor gave me this prescription . . ."

She took the paper from her pocket. Andy reached for it, and tore it across—carefully, three times.

"You won't need them," he told her. "I'll get you some aspirin, after we talk to Danney. Now, then, move over. I'm going to drive, and you are going to listen."

They shifted, and he started the car. He was thinking, as he drove; but he found time to pat the huddled shoulders, and found to his pleasure that they were less tense, less huddled.

"Larry Buzzell wouldn't want you to tell anything but the full truth," Andy Pine said. "If I'm any judge of character, helping you will be his sole concern. Just remember that and stop worrying. I can't promise you anything, of course, but no jury would convict —because it *was* an accident."

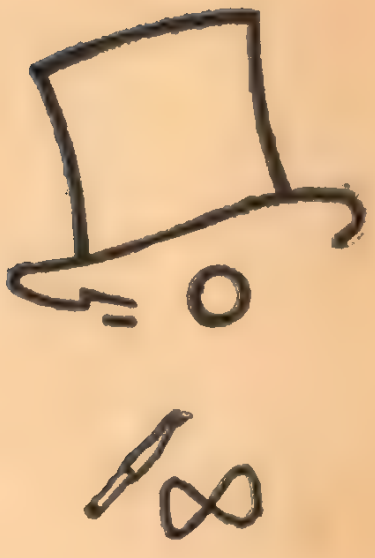
In the corner of the station wagon Doris Wilson cried, quietly, all the time they were headed for Waybrook.

A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE NOVELET NEXT MONTH

"THE TOFF"

In Another Exciting

Crime Adventure



By JOHN CREASEY

TWO MEN WAITED quietly, invisible in the shadows, on an unlit street in a residential part of West London. In two hours it would be dawn, and the street would come to life again.

The taller of the pair stood back against the wall, his face hidden by the curve of his arm, to avoid the slightest possibility that his pallor would give him away.

In the distance they could hear the sound of a motorcycle approaching fast. The beam bounced on the road.

"There he is," said the tall man. "Are you ready to shoot?"

"Yes."

"Good. I'll step out and slow him down."

The motorcycle roared nearer, until it was less than twenty yards away. The tall man stepped out of the shadow into the bright glare of the headlight, and threw up his arms, as if he were about to fling himself in front of the speeding vehicle. The light shone full upon him now, casting a black shadow.

The rider's face was tense and

THE TOFF AND THE UNKNOWN VICTIM

The midnight visitor gave his life to prevent a murder. It put Rollison under an obligation.

white. All he could see was the man in front of him—not the figure hiding in the shadows with the gun.

The brakes squealed, the machine wobbled. The man in the road darted away diagonally, to keep out of the line of fire. The motorcycle was still moving, swaying, swerving. For the barest instant the rider stared at the running man. Then his engine roared, as if suddenly he realized he had ridden into a trap.

He saw a flash of light from his left. There was a sharp report, and he felt a thud in his shoulder. Another flash, and a thud in his back brought an agonizing pain.

The motorcycle seemed bound to crash. His machine wobbled but he knew he must keep going, must not let the gunmen stop him. Every second was precious. If he failed now he knew there would be no hope for the girl for whom he had risked his life.

His fingers tightened as he heard another shot. But he did not see the flash, nor feel the bullet. He was still on the saddle—and riding more steadily now because he was traveling faster. He thought he heard a car's motor start up. They would have a car, of course; it must have been parked around the corner out of sight.

He crossed a bisecting street. How far was it to the West End? How far was it to his last desperate recourse . . . to the Toff?

If he failed to reach the Toff, the girl would have no chance at all.

In a way, he knew that his own life was forfeit. His only thought was for Clare, who did not know how large was her inheritance, who did not even suspect that her cousins planned to murder her for her money.

His back was aching continuously now, was becoming almost unbearable. He saw the reflection of a car's side lights in his rearview mirror and was sure his assailants were on his trail again. It would be useless to try to reach a telephone booth, because they would get him at the kiosk. He had only one chance—to reach the Toff before they overtook him.

A man could not tell the police that his own father was involved in a plot to murder a girl. But the Toff . . .

The wind was cold on his face, and he was sweating profusely. Abruptly he swung into a main road, where there were lights and shops. It was Kensington High-street—a straight wide road, where nothing disastrous could happen to him.

Perhaps he wasn't as badly hurt as he believed—perhaps, with luck, he would pull through. He could still sit upright anyhow, and keep the machine going forward. The lights of the car still showed in the rearview mirror, perhaps two hundred yards behind.

How could he mislead his pursuers? He knew how to get to Rollison's house, and that knowledge, at least, supplied a small measure of reassurance. Rollison, the Toff, was the one man who might perform the near-miracle that would turn the tables. And he could be trusted not to betray Dad.

The rider's back felt warm and sticky. More lights darted past, and a policeman came into view. If he stopped the man, if he told him—

He put the thought resolutely from him, realizing what it could lead to. He was hardly aware of the places he was passing—Knightsbridge, a street or two of old mansions, the vast expanse of Hyde Park Corner. To outward appearances he was just a motorcyclist, traveling through empty streets, with a car following him.

He saw the dark mass of Green Park on his right and, directly opposite, a long row of expensive shops and car showrooms. He swung left again, and no longer saw the car! A wave of relief swept over him. He knew exactly how to get to the Toff's house in Gresham-Terrace. It was a very short distance indeed and his attackers would never find him now.

He turned one corner, then another, staring fixedly into the mirror. He still did not see the pursuing car's lights. His confidence turned suddenly into absolute conviction. He would find the Toff in time. Twenty-two. He must not forget the number.

When he reached Gresham-Terrace, the car lights were still out of sight. Despite his torment he felt fiercely exultant as he slowed down and turned the handlebars until the light shone on the houses and the numbers over the front doors. The numbers stood out clearly in the sharp illumination. Twelve. Eighteen, Twenty-two.

He slowed towards the curb, and the front wheel bumped against the three-inch elevation. He was desperate with haste, but it was difficult for him to get off the machine, because the slightest movement sent a wave of dizziness coursing through him. Pain stabbed his back and shoulder, and for a moment he feared that he would pitch forward.

A car swept past the end of the street. He found himself standing upright by the side of the machine, which was like a ton weight pressing against his left leg. As he moved away he felt it slide down his leg, and heard it crash.

He took a deep breath, and the wave of pain and dizziness eased. He reached the front door. There was no sound of the car, which meant that it had either traveled on into the night or had stopped nearby. Even now, the two men might be coming after him on foot.

There were four bell-pushes outside the front door. He could

hardly read the brass name plates because it was so dark and his vision had become so unsteady. He must find Rollison's bell. The thought flashed through his mind that if he pushed them all Rollison would be bound to hear. But then he saw the name near the top bell, and his nerves steadied a little. He pressed his forefinger against the button and kept it there.

Slowly he began to slide down the wall. His finger left the bell, and his knees buckled. He did not lose consciousness, but was in a dreamlike state between waking and sleeping, although he did not realize it. He saw Clare's face and his father's face, dissolving, reforming, finally merging and becoming one.

He tried to speak. "Toff!" he whispered. "Toff."

He was startled by the loudness of his own voice and kept on trying: "Toff, Toff, Toff, Toff!"

A car came along the street, and terror such as he had never known flared in his mind.

IT IS NOT quite true to say that Richard Rollison, known to so many as the Toff, was a light sleeper. Often he slept heavily indeed. Yet a lifetime of emergency and of meeting the unexpected had trained him to awaken at any unusual noise. So he awoke and breathed an almost automatic sigh of complaint.

There was the familiar pale light of the street lamps outside with, as far as he could determine, only silence accompanying it. Yet the noise which had awakened him had set up a kind of echo in his brain, and he strove to identify it. It had been the noise of something falling, a metallic crash.

He yawned; his eyes still heavy with sleep. The crash—if it had been a crash—could hardly be important. He had heard no further sound, and the silence now was absolute. No, he was wrong about that. There were footsteps —faltering, uncertain, but footsteps nevertheless.

He hesitated. The footsteps seemed to slither, and that puzzled him. There seemed to be at least a fleeting possibility that someone was hurt. He crossed to the window, bare-footed, a pair of pale blue pajamas giving him an almost spectral aspect. The window was open at the top, causing him to curse softly. If he wanted to see the front of the house, it had to be open at the bottom. He heard more footsteps. The window stuck. He heaved, and it shot up suddenly, pinching his fingers. He winced as he leaned out.

He saw a motorcycle lying close to the pavement, but there did not appear to be anyone near it. Then he heard a faint sound, but it was quickly drowned out by the noise of a car passing the end of the street. For a moment, he heard nothing more.

Then his front-door bell rang. The bell had a low-pitched sound, which was relayed to every room in the apartment, but could be switched off at any door. The present ringing came unmistakably from the bedroom.

Rollison switched on a light, snatched up his dressing-gown, thrust his feet into bedroom slippers, and reached the door while the bell was still ringing. It was peculiar that it should continue to ring with such insistence.

As he stepped out to the landing, the ringing stopped. He ran down the narrow and steep stairs and heard nothing until he reached the door. Then he heard again the sound of the car at the end of the street. It was louder now, seemed to be coming nearer.

There was no reason at all to suspect that the car had anything to do with the caller. And yet—Rollison opened the door, and saw a youth lying crumpled in a heap on the porch, his legs doubled up under him. One arm was crushed, the other, close to his head, bent at a grotesque angle.

The car was coming nearer, and slowing down. That fact alone sounded a warning in Rollison's mind. In the glow of headlights, he saw blood on the porch near the unconscious youth's left shoulder.

Everything seemed to add up to one thing—danger. An injured man, a crawling car, and beside the driver, someone with the alert, crouched look of a gunman.

Swiftly he thrust his arms beneath the youth, and just as he did so, the gunman in the car took aim. Breathing harshly but refusing to be unnerved by the need for haste, Rollison dragged the youth to the safety of the hallway, and kicked the door shut. The sound of its slamming was less loud then the thud of a bullet burying itself in wood.

Rollison heard men approaching the door. He turned round, and shot the bolt at the top. If they tried to get in that would hold them for awhile.

He hurried up the stairs, with the unconscious youth in his arms. He felt a cold trickle of spilled blood on his wrist. The lad was quite young, but the pallor of his features, his gauntly haggard aspect, made him seem older.

Suddenly the eyelids fluttered, and for a moment the pupils glinted in the light of the second-floor landing. He moved his lips, and Rollison heard a whisper. "They'll kill her. You've got to—save her."

"Save who?" asked Rollison urgently. "Try to tell me. A name, at least. Just who is in danger? Who are *they?*"

There was a glassy look in the youth's eyes, and he made a feeble effort to speak again. Then his body sagged, and his eyes closed.

Rollison acted almost with the

speed of thought. He carried the youth into the kitchen and laid him down on the floor. He securely bolted the door, knelt down, and felt the pulse in the limp wrist.

The young man was dead.

Rollison put out the light, opened the kitchen door, and stepped on to the dark fire escape. He began rapidly to descend to the street. The iron rungs made a slight sound at every step. His face was set in tight lines when he reached the courtyard, which led to a narrow-turning opening on a road at right angles to Gresham-Terrace.

Two minutes later he was at the end of the road—just in time to see the car disappear around the corner, a hundred feet to his right.

ROLLISON TURNED away from the telephone, after calling Scotland Yard, and bent over the dead youth's body. He searched the pockets of the grey tweed coat and grey flannels, and found the membership card of a sailors' club in Whitechapel, and a letter offering one "Jack Lawson" a job as chief steward in a freighter sailing for South America the following week.

As he searched, Rollison remembered the dead man's last words: "They'll kill her. You've got to save her."

It must, he told himself, be a case of desperate urgency. It might even be a matter of an hour or two—and the woman or girl might be dead already. Killers had tried to make sure that Lawson would not talk and had very nearly succeeded.

The Toff went into his bedroom and dressed. As he finished, there was another ring at the front door. He went to the wardrobe, opened a drawer at the bottom and took out a small automatic and a gas pistol which was a little larger. He pocketed both weapons, and hurried downstairs.

On the safe side of the door, he demanded: "Who's there? It's pretty late for anyone to come calling."

"The Yard sent us round, Mr. Rollison," a not unfriendly voice said. "Open up."

"Wait a minute," Rollison said. He unbolted the door and kept it on a chain until he made sure that these men were detectives. A Flying Squad car was outside. One of the policemen was bending over the motorcycle.

"What's this about a murder?" asked the man who had answered the Toff's call. He was Detective Inspector Yule of the Flying Squad.

"The evidence is upstairs in my apartment," Rollison said. "So is all the hope we've got of finding an unknown victim."

It took him two minutes to explain the situation, another two minutes for Yule and three others from the Yard to grasp all of the sinister implications.

The police were as often as not magnificent, but their hide-bound regulations could be a grave disadvantage. They could seldom act with vital speed. They had to work a step at a time, building up their case and justifying every action they took. If ever there had been a time to cut red tape down the middle, this was it.

Lawson had died while trying to save an unknown girl. And the dead had a very strong moral right to insist on very quick and decisive action.

Yule was a gruff-voiced, able man, who lost no time in saying: "You mean some girl's in line for murder, but you haven't the slightest idea who she is or even where to look?"

Rollison nodded, his expression somber. "That's it." But he wasn't actually thinking about the remark or his own answer. He was only trying to sift the evidence, such as it was.

Why hadn't the youth telephoned the Yard? He would have been connected in a few seconds, and could have given the name of the girl and told them exactly where to find her. Instead, he had driven through London's dark streets on a motorcycle, determined, despite the gravity of his condition, to deliver his message in person.

There was one thing he did know—a criminal in very serious trouble might fear the police, yet not hesitate to trust the Toff. A man who was told that if he called the police someone dear to him would die, might still decide that the Toff would be able to help him.

Two C.I.D. men were already on their way up to Rollison's apartment. Yule was still by the front door.

"If you've any ideas, Mr. Rollison—" he began.

"Vague ones," Rollison said, from the porch. "I'll be back soon."

He slipped past one man who was covering the patch of blood with a cloth, turned into Gresham-Terrace, and then ran towards the end of the road and the garage where he kept his car.

He was very certain of one thing. The police could not take the desperate chance he had to grasp right now.

ROLLISON TURNED the car into Wilberforce-street, Fulham, and slowed down. There was no light at any window, and only one street lamp was on. But the headlights enabled him to pick out the house numbers. He jumped out and strode to No. 12. According to the letter, Jack Lawson had lived there.

The Toff did not approach the small front door but went straight to the sash-cord window and examined it in the light of his pencil torch. The catch was fastened. He thrust a knife with a slender blade

between the two panes, and forced the catch. Then he pushed his fingertips into the tiny gap and thrust the window up.

He found himself in a small room. His torch just showed the closed door, and the blank wall surrounding it. He opened the door and, as he did so, another door creaked upstairs. An alarmed voice called out: "Who's there?"

Rollison had moved into a small passage, facing a flight of narrow stairs. Above him was the figure of an elderly man, his hair frizzy against a light from an upstairs room.

"I'm from the police," Rollison said swiftly, and began to run up the stairs. "Are you Mr. Lawson?"

"What are you doing here?" The man quavered, and then his voice trailed away.

That told Rollison, as it would have told any policeman, that the man was badly frightened, that he was suffering from acute nervous tension, believing that he was face to face with the Law.

Rollison asked harshly: "Are you Jack Lawson's father?"

"Y-y-yes," the old man stammered. "But I don't see—"

Rollison said: "Your son was murdered in cold blood tonight. Do you understand what I'm saying? He was *murdered*."

He gripped the blue-striped pajamas and drew the frail body closer. Lawson was thin and tallish. His face was working, and he seemed on the point of tears.

In the room beyond, a woman was standing very still, her hand at her throat. She was staring, as if she dared not even breathe.

"It—it can't be true," Lawson gasped. "They wouldn't kill Jack. They wouldn't—" Again his voice trailed off into an incoherent muttering.

"Who wouldn't kill him?" demanded Rollison. "Come on, tell me! Just who are *they*?"

He realized that if he were to make this man talk, it would have to be immediately. Jack could have telephoned, under ordinary circumstances. But apparently something had held him back, had made him try to by-pass the police to reach the Toff. Had the driving force been loyalty or fear? Had his emotions been bound up with friends or with his father?

The latter possibility had brought the Toff to this house. Now a terrified old man stood in front of him. He did not know who the woman was, but saw that she was young, and not likely to be that man's wife.

"Tell me who you mean," Rollison said, almost savagely, and shook the old man, fearing he had arrived too late. "He was killed trying to save a girl. Who are *they*, who is the girl?"

There was a moment of awful silence. Then the old man burst out: "It—it's Clare. It's Clare

reached the open door and ran screaming from the room.

A moment later she heard footsteps thudding on the stairs. A tall man came running towards her. He too held a gun and his lips were set in tight lines.

She saw him point it to one side of her, saw a flash, and heard a gasp as of pain. She did not stop running until she reached the tall stranger, who was looking towards the door of her room. When, at last, she turned around, she saw her cousin lying crumpled up, the gun near his outstretched hand.

"NO DOUBT Clare Bannion will get over the shock and the loss of her boyfriend," Rollison agreed, in the office of a Scotland Yard superintendent next day.

"She'll have a fortune to help her, too. That won't make it any more difficult! But there's one thing she probably doesn't know. She's never likely to find another man ready to make the sacrifice that Jack Lawson made."

The C.I.D. superintendent, a tall, thin, gaunt-looking man who always dressed in brown, nodded in agreement.

"She isn't likely to remember just how much she owes to you either. This is an occasion when I salute you."

"Now I really feel life's worth while," said the Toff, and felt a great humility.

MIKE SHAYNE Presents

Next Month's Headliners

DEAD ON THE HOUR by BRETT HALLIDAY

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FURY IN THE FOG

A NEW JIM TROY NOVELET

by THEODORE MATHIESON

When a riverboat gambler's stakes run high and dangerous eyes watch across the green baize . . . a mystery in the fog can be unnerving. So Jim played it cool.

FROM WHERE HE sat playing solitaire at a green baize covered table in the barroom of the *Bella Union,* Jim Troy watched the little man with the square, stupid face and spaniel eyes ply his trade among the late stragglers at the bar.

"Come on, gents. Only four bits for a lot of fun—hit me wit' this bat!" The little man, in clothes too big for him, held out a baseball bat and smiled ingratiatingly up at his prospective customers, his eyes peering with comical pleading through the straw-like wisps of blond hair that straggled from beneath a battered felt hat.

© 1959, by Theodore Mathieson

"All right, Oofty Goofty, you're askin' fer it!" said one of the bar customers, a huge, red-faced fellow in the dress of a Hoodlum. He slapped down a fifty cent piece on the bar and reached for the bat. Oofty Goofty snatched the coin and pocketed it, then made a quarter turn away from his customer, bending over slightly and hunching his shoulders in preparation for the blow.

Troy winced at the vicious sound the bat made as it struck Oofty flatly in the small of the back. The blow knocked the little man forward several feet, but after a moment he straightened and

cried victoriously: "There, you didn't hurt me at all! Didn't feel a t'ing. Just the bite of a mosquita!"

The red-faced Hoodlum scowled and started to raise the bat again. "Izzatso? Well, you little sinner! Just fer that you're gonna take one on the noggin! And this time you're sure gonna feel it."

Troy was on his feet instantly, his handsome, sharply-planed face flushed with sympathy for the little man.

"Put down that bat." He spoke quietly, but his gray eyes, unwaveringly earnest, made his words an implacable command. Troy was not a big man, but well-proportioned, and when aroused he had a muscular trick of making himself seem larger than he really was.

The Hoodlum faced Troy with slack-lipped surprise. Inhabitants of San Francisco's Barbary Coast didn't give Hoodlums orders, not when they travelled in packs and were more ready for offense than defense. He glanced meaningfully at his three cronies, dressed as he was in the regulation dandified fashion—in hard bowlers, tilted over the eyebrows, olive frock coats with puffed shoulders, peaked sleeves, flaring at the hips, and tight trousers with bell bottoms.

"You know who yer talkin' to, gambler?" the Hoodlum sneered. "Skipper Leach. And I can call a hundred others, just like my friends here, to see that I don't put down no bat!"

Troy didn't answer, but watched the other three, as they put their hands into their pockets and slipped on sets of iron knuckles. He knew a Hoodlum seldom carried a fire-arm, but depended upon his fists, a stout hickory bludgeon, and sometimes a knife —adequate armament since the Hoodlums were never known to attack even the inoffensive Chinese of the Barbary Coast unless they vastly outnumbered their victims. So the instant Skipper Leach brought the knife flashing from his pocket, Troy produced, as if by magic, his small revolver with the rosewood stock.

"Now put that bat down, Leach. You've already got what you paid for."

"We'll wipe yuh out, gambler," Leach said, but when neither Troy's eye nor his gun wavered, he threw down the bat insolently at Oofty Goofty's feet, spitting after it.

Instantly Troy's gun cracked. The Hoodlum's bowler went sailing upward and descended toward the bar, the hard edge of it striking the mouth of the brass spittoon with a portentous, gong-like sound.

"Next time I'll put one through your empty head," Troy said calmly. "Pick up that bat and hand it to Oofty."

The Hoodlum did as he was

told, then recovered his ventilated hat.

"Now get out."

Without further hesitation the red-faced Leach jammed his hat on his head and started for the swinging doors, walking with the rolling, sinister gait of his breed. The others followed him.

When the Hoodlums had disappeared onto Kearny Street, Oofty Goofty came over to Troy, holding out his hand. "T'ank you very much, Mister Troy," he said. "Leach woulda killed me. He's a mean one. I'm sorry you had to tangle wit' him. He'll be out to get you."

"I can take care of myself, Oofty," Troy said.

ON THE FOLLOWING Saturday afternoon at ten minutes to four, Troy knew he was going to have to prove what he told Oofty.

He stood on the upper deck of the *Chrysopolis,* the queen of the riverboats which ran from San Francisco to Sacramento, and watched Skipper Leach and four other Hoodlums swagger confidently down the timbered wharf and up the gangplank, without once looking at where he stood.

They knew he was there, of course. And *he* knew if he wasn't watchful every moment of the next fourteen hours—the running time to the capital city—the chances were more than even that he'd be slipped unconscious into the muddy waters of the Sacramento River.

Then as Troy turned away from the rail to go to his cabin, he espied the two partners of the *Bella Union,* Josh McCabe and Billy Skeantlebury, running down the wharf, shouting his name and waving at him.

He waved back and descended to the lower deck to meet them. Skeantlebury, the slighter of the two, sandy-haired and red cheeked, was the first one up the gangplank.

"How long we got before the boat leaves, Troy?"

"Ten minutes."

"Let's go where we can talk—you and I and Josh."

"My stateroom is right at hand," Troy said.

By this time McCabe arrived, carrying a suitcase. He was about Troy's size and coloring, but a few years older and his face had a pale, nighted look. Troy led the two men to his cabin amidship. Once the door was closed behind him, McCabe was the first to speak.

"Troy, Oofty told us what happened beween you and Skipper Leach, the Hoodlum leader, in our place the other night. Now it's all over the Coast that they're out to get you. They know you work the river boats over the week-end, and they're planning to come aboard and take care of you."

"They're here," Troy said laconically.

"What are you going to do about it?" Skeantlebury demanded.

"Just keep my eyes open, I guess."

Skeantlebury shook his head impatiently. "You've got to have protection. Now McCabe here had to go Sacramento on business anyway, so he's going to be at your side every moment."

Troy glanced at Skeantlebury, his eyes narrowing. "Why should you be so worried about my health?"

Skeantlebury's boyish face flushed and he slid his eyes towards McCabe. "Maybe you'd better tell him, Josh."

"Skeantlebury thinks he'd like us to put you on the payroll at the *Bella Union,* Troy. You're the only honest gambler we know, and that trick of yours of reading cards without looking at them—"

"It's a gift, not a trick," Troy said.

"Well, you're getting to be a sort of attraction, anyway. We'd like to have you full-time. We'd make it worth your while not to work the river boats."

The whistle of the *Chrysopolis* blew a mournful blast.

"This is a hell of a time to make a business proposition," Troy opined.

Skeantlebury dashed for the stateroom door. "Will you at least think it over?" he urged.

"Sure, I'll think it over."

"McCabe will give you the details. Take care of him, Josh." Skeantlebury waved and disappeared.

Troy and McCabe went out on deck then and saw Skeantlebury jump to the wharf an instant before the gangplank was lifted, and a few seconds later the steamer blew two short blasts, and started backing into the bay.

Skeantlebury stood upon the wharf waving until he grew so small that Troy and McCabe couldn't distinguish him any more. Then the two men went forward to the saloon.

The main cabin was crowded, but Troy saw no Hoodlums there. Evidently Skipper Leach was keeping his gang well out of the way until they'd done what they'd come to do.

"Have a drink on me, Troy," McCabe said. Troy nodded and they stepped up to the bar.

As Troy called his order to the bartender, a man on his right, dressed in black and white like himself, the garb of the professional gambler, turned full upon Troy and studied him openly. Troy, annoyed by the scrutiny, stared back.

The man was tall and thin, with a cadaverous face, black hair, and ice-blue eyes. At Troy's unwavering glance, his thin, ascetic lips tightened in a mirthless smile.

"Your name's Jim Troy, isn't

it?" he drawled in a deep, grating voice.

Troy jerked his head a fraction, watchfully.

"My name is Wasley. Jacob Wasley. I've only been in California a month, but I've heard of you. The honest gambler, who can read his opponent's mind. I'm real glad to make your acquaintance."

Wesley's hand, thin and bony as his face, came forward and Troy grasped it.

"Y'see, I'm just an *ordinary* gambler, Troy. Just between two professionals, I only cheat at cards." He laughed at his little joke, a staccato bark of a laugh. "But I promised myself the pleasure—if I ever met you—to break a life-time rule, which is never to play with another gambler, and ask you for a game. My crooked skill against your natural, open-faced talents. What do you say?"

"I don't mind," Troy said. "But if I catch you in the middle of a switch, you're through."

"Fair enough," Wesley laughed. "And use your own deck, if you like."

Troy and Wasley found an empty table at the back of the saloon, and McCabe accompanied them with a worried frown. Upon the red velvet seat a common pin caught Wasley's eye. He picked it up and stuck it into his lapel.

"Never throw away anything, never let anything go to waste—or you'll have bad luck!" Wasley said.

Troy smiled at the gambler's superstition—he had a few of his own—and sat down. McCabe's pleasure in the imminent contest was apprently eclipsed by a concern of his own. He sat clearly out of contact as Troy and Wasley continued.

"Poker?" asked Troy.

"Too slow. Make it Euchre. You deal the first game."

Troy played slowly and deliberately at first, concentrating hard when he called for suits.

"You never call for what I've *got!*" Wasley complained after a while. The warmth of the cabin and the strain of concentration had brought a deep flush to his face, and he was perspiring profusely.

"That's my open-faced talent working there," Troy said smiling.

"Damned if I don't think you *do* read 'em!' "

Wasley was soon euchréd, Troy got all five points, winning the first game, and then it was Wasley's turn to deal. After that, no matter how hard Troy tried to follow suit, he could rarely do it. He felt an anger stirring, but mastered it by breathing slowly and deeply. Presently his cool-headedness paid off. He reached over and caught Wasley's right hand as the gambler picked up the deck to deal.

"That's a clever one-handed cut you got there," Troy said, disen-

gaging half the deck between the gambler's nimble fourth and fifth fingers.

Wasley shrugged and smiled good humoredly. "Y'know," he drawled, "you're only the second man to see that pass in the last ten years." He was genuinely friendly now. "You win, Troy. Maybe I should study your method."

"It isn't a method, it was a present from my mother. She knew to the very day and hour and minute, when she was going to die."

Wasley stared uncomfortably at Troy as McCabe suddenly reached over and grasped Troy by the wrist.

"Look over there," McCabe murmured, nodding towards the doorway to the deck. Skipper Leach stood in front of it in a typical Hoodlum stance, his left hand resting negligently in his back pocket, his right hand close to his red face as he ostensibly studied his nails under a hat cockily tilted forward to conceal his eyes. But they were visible anyhow, and busy making a circuit of the cabin. Now they came to rest on Troy and his two companions.

He stared insolently for several seconds, then turned slowly and left the saloon.

"That's no friend of yours," Wasley said observantly.

"I read it the same way," Troy murmured. "He and four others just like him are out to get me. Come on, McCabe. We might as well make something clear to those boys."

Troy left Wasley sitting at the table and threaded his way among the passengers to the door, with McCabe tagging after him.

"Ought we go asking for it, Troy?" McCabe asked anxiously.

"Remember what Cervantes said: 'The man who lets his enemies know he is prepared has his battle half fought.'"

McCabe looked unconvinced.

Out on deck a high fog obscured the late afternoon sun, and the wind that swept in from the ocean was cold and raw. To the left, down the way that Troy must pass to reach his stateroom, Skipper Leach and his four Hoodlums were lined up, leaning alert and deadly against the bulkhead, looking straight before them out on the bay. Because of the chill wind, no other passengers were on deck.

Troy walked casually up to the rail opposite Leach.

"Listen, Leach," he said distinctly, "I'm not aiming to let myself be beaten up by you and your crowd. If you come at me individually I'll fight you fairly. But if I see all of you moving in on me, I'm going to put holes in your boys —the way I did to your hat. Understand? I mean what I say, and I'm ready, anytime."

"Don't worry, Troy," Leach

said jerking his head towards McCabe. "You're just two against us five, and you both can't be lookin' *all* the time! We'll get yuh!"

"You'd better count again, Hood," another voice said, and Troy was surprised to see Jacob Wasley join them. "I'm packing a little pill shooter, just like Mr. Troy here. One dose to a customer, and he's cured of anything that ails him. *You sick, Hood?*"

Leach's dead-black eyes crawled viciously over Wasley's attenuated figure. He walked forward to the rail and spat contemptuously into the water. Without another word Leach turned and started walking aft, and one by one his cronies followed him in single file, strutting ludicrously like poorly manipulated marionettes.

Wasley gave his barking laugh at the sight of them.

But Troy shook his head. "Yes, they look ridiculous, and as individuals I guess they are. But together they'e plenty dangerous."

"I'm a New Orleans man myself," Wasley said, "so I don't know."

Troy turned and smiled. "Well, thanks Wasley, for your help."

"If you need it again, just call on me. It'll be a pleasure." Wasley smiled bleakly and went back into the saloon.

McCabe spoke up, his voice husky with suppressed excitement. "Troy, I want to talk to you."

"Shoot."

"Not here. Back in the cabin."

Twilight had fallen on the bay. The two men, clutching their hats against the wind which had risen in the velocity, bent forward and pushed their way amidships.

They were almost to the stateroom when Troy stopped McCabe suddenly and spoke close to his ear. "I locked the door when we left. Did you unlock it?"

"No, why should I?"

Troy pointed to the louvered window of their cabin through which lamp light shone dimly.

"You think they're waiting for us already?"

Troy drew out his revolver, and turning the knob of the door slowly, threw it open with a single quick movement.

"Mister Troy!"

Oofty Goofty stood in the center of the cabin, slowly lowering his bat, smiling fatuously. "You scared me, Mister Troy. I heard you creepin' up and I t'ought it was Leach and his gang comin' in!"

"What are you doing here. Oofty?" Troy asked, stepping inside the cabin.

"I just t'ought I'd come along to help you in case of trouble," Oofty said, with a wide, ingratiating smile. "After all, it was because of me you got into it. Hello, Mister McCabe."

McCabe closed the door and stood frowning, as if he resented Oofty's sudden intrusion.

"How did you get in our stateroom?" Troy asked.

"I just follered the steward around until I found his cabin; then I slipped in and stole his master key."

"I guess Oofty's not as simple as he appears," Mr. McCabe said giving the little man a sharp look.

"Simple!" Oofty was outraged. "Have you forgotten I worked on the same bill at Bottle Koenig's as Mr. Skeantlebury did, before you took him as your partner!"

"Oofty sang one song, did one dance, and then they threw him out on the sidewalk," McCabe said wryly.

"All right, I was no good! But that was before I found my career!" Oofty held up his bat triumphantly as if it were the symbol of his success.

"Well, you can't sleep here, Oofty," Troy said with a sigh. "Come on, we'll hunt up the steward and get you a cabin of your own."

"I ain't got the money, Mr. Troy."

"This excursion is on me."

"Troy—"

The gambler turned back from the open door. McCabe stood by the tiered bunks, grasping a supporting pole so tightly his knuckles shone white.

"What is it, McCabe? You sick?"

"The roll has got me a little queasy," he admitted.

"Then you stay here." Troy smiled his assurance. "With my six shooter and Oofty's bat, we're equal to any obstacle."

McCabe tried to smile, but the attempt was ghastly. The last glimpse Troy had of him, he was rushing towards the washbowl and gripping it with both hands.

The steward found an empty cabin for Oofty on the upper deck, giving the little man sharp, critical glances the while. He accepted Troy's payment of his fare with a show of reluctance, as if he would rather have locked Oofty in the hold as a stowaway.

"You've got to get that key back to the steward," Troy said. after the officer left them.

"I a'ready slipped it in his pocket," Oofty smiled, delighted with himself.

"Now, Oofty," Troy said sternly, "I want to thank you for coming. I may need you, and if I do, I'll call. But you don't have to follow me about."

"All right, Mister Troy," Oofty Goofty said obediently, blinking rapidly. "You call me if you need me."

"I will. And thanks again for coming, Oofty."

Troy descended from the upper deck, heading for his cabin, then changed his mind and strolled aft to the dining cabin. The wind had died now, a thick tule fog had arisen, and the *Chrysopolis* wallowed up the Sacramento, giving

short toots on the whistle, then waiting for the reply from the echo boards, placed strategically along the bends of the river.

As Troy passed a life-boat on its davits, he heard approaching him a tramp of several feet, and instantly pressed himself back against the keel of the overhanging boat. The next moment five recognizable figures sauntered past in their characteristic way, and Troy breathed a sigh of relief at his lucky escape. The Hoodlums must be patrolling the decks in the hopes of running across him alone.

As their steps faded, Troy continued aft to the dining cabin, and then stopped once more with his hand upon the latch, listening to the thrashing of the side paddles in the invisible water, and to the eerily echoing whistle.

Again he heard footsteps behind him, light ones this time, and someone said: "Mr. Troy?"

It was a young woman's voice, coming out of the white mist somewhere near him. He realized at once that she couldn't have seen him standing there. She must have followed him. His hand sought his revolver, and he tensed himself for instant action.

"Yes," he said, swinging himself lightly to one side of the door.

But there was no sudden scuffling of feet, no shot. The girl's voice spoke quietly again.

"My name is Grace Noonan. I'm a friend of a friend of yours—Pauline Carter at the Bella Union?"

"Yes?"

"I saw you on the upper deck just now, and when you came out of your stateroom, I followed you."

"Well?"

"Just before you came out, I saw someone standing outside listening. I couldn't see him too clearly. He didn't see me. Then he ran off—and you came out. I thought I'd better tell you."

"How did you recognize me?"

"I saw you in the saloon earlier this afternoon, playing cards. Then I saw you with the steward and another man go into the cabin."

Troy relaxed. The fog which kept Troy and the girl hidden from each other also bound them in a common element, and Grace Noonan's sweet voice, with a slight trace of an Irish lilt in it, sounded with such intimacy that Troy felt his masculine curiosity aroused. If the girl looked the way she sounded.

"I was just going into the dining saloon, Miss Noonan," he said. "Would you have supper with me? Then we can talk it over."

"Thank you, Mr. Troy, I will," the girl said.

And aware that he was taking a chance, that the girl who spoke like a Celtic princess might look like an Anglo Saxon witch, Troy reached out in the mist and grasp-

ing her fur-coated arm, piloted her cautiously into the dining cabin.

Inside Troy breathed with relief. Grace Noonan had lived up to her promise—tall but sturdy, smooth-skinned, with coal black hair, parted in the middle and drawn sleekly down over her ears —rather severe, Troy thought, in view of her attractively soft and eager face and her eloquent hazel eyes.

"How is Pauline?" Grace Noonan asked after Troy had given the waiter their order. "I haven't seen her lately."

"Doing well," Troy said. "She plans to tour the mining camps this summer."

"We worked together at the Adelphi. Had a sister act. But Mr. Skeantlebury wanted her for a solo, so we had to break up."

"Skeantlebury wants me to work for him," Troy said.

"He's the best Ranger on the Coast. You can't go wrong working for him."

"You don't seem to hold it against him for breaking up your sister act."

Grace flushed and bit her lip. "Oh, no, I have nothing against Mr. Skeantlebury! It was a fine chance for Pauline, you see."

IT WAS A pleasant meal, and Troy, who liked good food, good wine, and a woman's companionship, relaxed for the first time since coming aboard the *Chrysopolis*.

"May I walk you back to your cabin, Miss Noonan?" Troy asked as they rose to leave.

"Yes, please. And call me Grace. "After all, we *do* have a mutual friend."

Out on deck the fog was as thick as ever, and the girl held tightly to Troy's arm.

"My stateroom is just beyond yours," she said as they walked forward, and then as Troy glanced down at her quickly, she gasped and averted her eyes as she realized her mistake.

"I thought you were under the impression my cabin was on the upper deck," Troy said quietly.

She broke into a sudden laugh. "I just pretended to think that, Jim."

Then she stopped suddenly, her body tensing. In the murky glow of a deck lamp her mouth fell open and she stared straight ahead, and Troy, following her gaze, saw dimly a figure huddled against the taffrail. Pushing Grace protectively back against the bulkhead, he approached the figure warily and saw that it was a man in a dark suit leaning over the rail, his arms thrust over and back under it, his legs crumpled against the deck.

With a gasp of recognition, Troy put his hand on the man's shoulder.

"McCabe!"

The man did not stir. Troy gently disengaged McCabe's arms

from the rail, and lifted him upon his shoulder.

"You lead the way, Grace," he said. "My cabin is one hundred and two."

Inside the stateroom the lamp was still burning. Troy laid McCabe on the lower bunk and examined him briefly. His face was battered almost beyond recognition, and the marks of corrugated iron knuckles were everywhere apparent. A crushing blow upon the back of the head, possibly inflicted with a slung shot, had killed him. Troy turned in time to see Grace, who'd come over to look at McCabe, put her hands over her eyes.

"He's dead," Troy said, laying a towel from the washstand gently over McCabe's face. "Those devils murdered him. They thought he was me. He's the same size, the same coloring. They must have seen him come out of the cabin alone, and in the fog—"

"He's got something in his hand," Grace said, pointing with a trembling finger.

From McCabe's grasp Troy withdrew a small, folded white handkerchief.

"Some of the hoods wear these in the breast pocket of their suits," Troy explained wearily. "It won't prove much."

But on one side of the handkerchief there showed a curious black smudge, which, when Troy examined it more closely, appeared to contain a multitude of minute circles. Troy frowned. For a moment the strange mark almost recalled something. Then the association escaped him entirely and he sighed, putting the handkerchief in his pocket.

"What are you going to do about it, Jim?"

"I've got Oofty on my side, and Wasley, the gambler, said he'd help. That would be three against five."

"Go to the captain, Jim. Report it. Don't do anything you'd be sorry for."

Troy looked speculatively at Grace. "Why did you pretend you didn't know where my cabin was?"

Grace flushed. "I didn't want you to think I'd deliberately sought you out. After all, I've seen you often with Pauline. I've often envied her, Jim."

She came quietly to him and stood very close. "When I saw you come on board alone, I made up my mind to get to know you. I found out where your stateroom was, first of all."

"Then that story about someone standing outside the cabin on the upper deck, was pure fabrication."

Grace lowered her eyes demurely. "It worked. You took me to supper."

Troy studied the girl sharply. Then he reached out and drew her to him. Her kiss was hard and passionate, and after a moment.

Troy thrust her away from him with a sigh, and started pacing up and down the narrow cabin.

Presently a change in the motion of the *Chrysopolis* brought Troy up short, and his heart froze. The steady shuddering of the vessel, to which he'd grown used in the past hours under way, suddenly ceased, and the paddle wheels were stilled. But only for a few seconds, time enough to bring their forward motion to a stop, and permit the engineer to reverse them.

By the time the paddles started chunking again, Troy realized that the *Chrysopolis* was making its customary stop at the Rio Vista landing.

"Now those Hoodlums think they've done their job, they'll jump the boat the minute it scrapes the dock!" Troy cried. "I've got to see that Captain now!" He grasped Grace by the arm and hurried her out on deck.

The fog had dispersed temporarily, and although the banks of the river were still shrouded in it, the entire length of the deck was clear in the glow from the lamps. Up forward lights moved busily to and fro, and they could hear the hubbub of increased activity.

"You stay in your cabin, where you'll be safe," Troy ordered the girl. "Don't get mixed up in this."

"Come back later, Jim," she whispered, standing at her stateroom door. "I want to know you're all right."

"I will," Troy promised. "As soon as as I've played this hand."

Then he was running up the iron stairway first to the upper passenger deck, and then, by means of a ladder, to the roof deck, where he paused momentarily, awed by the gigantic walking beam which teeter-tottered slowly in its trunch-eons, plunging twin valve rods to the bowels of the ship.

He found Captain Hansen standing upon the narrow bridge forward of the pilot house. The captain was a stocky, stubborn-chinned man, who now bellowed orders to the crew below.

"Captain," Troy shouted over the din. To his left he could see the lights on the landing looming closer. In another two or three minutes . . .

"What is it?" the captain growled impatiently, barely glancing at Troy.

"There's been a man murdered on board."

"Murdered?"

"Just a few minutes ago. The men who did it—the man who beat him up—will probably try to get off the ship as soon as you make that landing. They've got to be stopped!"

"They've got to be what?" the Captain bridled. "Nobody's telling me what's got to be done on board my ship!"

"If you don't stop them right now, Captain, they'll escape."

"I'll have to look into this. Where is the dead man?"

"But there's no time."

The Captain leaned over the railing of the bridge and shouted at his first mate: "Hey, Hunter, don't let anyone ashore until I tell you to!"

"Tell them why," Troy urged. "Tell them to stop the Hoodlums!"

Hansen glared recalcitrantly and lumbered towards the ladder.

"What cabin?"

"One hundred and two."

But before the Captain was halfway to the deck, Troy had run to the opposite, port side, and scrambling over the edge, dropped to the passenger deck almost in front of Oofty Goofty's cabin.

"Oofty!" he shouted, beating on the door.

There was the scrape of the lock and Oofty opened the door, his bat ready in his hand.

"Oofty, the Hoodlums killed McCabe. Will you bring your bat and help me stop them from leaving the boat?"

"Sure t'ing, Mister Troy. I'm right with you."

With Oofty behind him Troy next descended to the saloon. Wasley sat in the rear with three other men in the middle of a game of *vingt et un.*

"Wasley," Troy said with quiet urgency, stepping up to the playing table. "You said you'd help me. I need you now."

Wasley glanced up and seemed at first hostile. But then his eyes became friendly again. He pocketed his winnings, excused himself to the others and followed Troy out on deck. Troy explained as he hustled Wasley forward to the bow, and Oofty tagged behind.

"We can't let them off, Wasley," Troy concluded. "Even if we have to wing them."

"I said I'd help," Wasley assured him, grinning.

The three of them stood now in the bright deck lights facing aft, and as the hull scraped the landing dock, they spread apart a little, at Troy's suggestion.

"Where's Hunter?" Troy asked, directing the question at the crew in general.

A dark Italian spoke up at once: "He's huntin' for the Cap'n. The Cap'n gave an order, and he didn't get it."

"The order was for you to stop some killers from leaving this ship," Troy said. "The captain wants you to help us!"

But Troy's call to action had little effect. The crew seemed to have no inclination to mix in something that might prove dangerous. They pretended little understanding, and continued about their jobs with a wary eye on Troy and his companions.

Then suddenly the Hoodlums appeared from around the starboard side of the saloon. Skipper Leach was in the lead, and for once he and his cronies were not

swaggering. Their faces bore various expressions of fright, not a few verging on panic, and when Troy lifted his hand and stepped fowards, the catch was tripped, and the Hoodlums began running mindlessly, seeking instant flight.

Oofty was among them at once, flailing right and left with his bat, and bone-crunching smacks were punctuated by yelps of pain. Wasley tackled one Hoodlum, but clearly his antagonist was getting the better of him. Troy himself jumped for Skipper Leach as the Hoodlum tried to climb to the dock. He caught Leach around the neck and pulled him back, and then the Hoodlum's weight fell full upon him, crushing the breath out of him. At once Leach leapt to his feet and to the dock, while Troy, dazed, rose more slowly. He reached for his pistol, but found that in the struggle it had fallen from his pocket and lay some yards away.

He could see two of the Hoodlums running off into the leafy darkness beyond the dock shed, and Leach trailing after them, limping. There was a cry as another Hoodlum fell from the ship into the water, and Oofty stood with his bat poised, looking happily down at him. Then Wasley, whose captive had escaped, pulled his revolver from his pocket and fired after him. The bullet, apparently missing its intended mark, struck the fleeing Leach, who threw up his arms with a cry and fell to the ground.

"JIM TROY," Skipper Leach said, opening his eyes for the first time since the fight.

Troy sat alone with the Hoodlum in the latter's stateroom, and as Leach tried to lift his head to look about him, Troy pushed it gently but resolutely back upon the pillow. Troy's face was cold and implacable. He'd been waiting for this moment.

It was an hour after the fight. The *Chrysopolis* was again on its way up river, having fought clear of the fog, and now steamed under a crystal, star-stippled sky. Three Hoodlums had escaped. One who fell into the river had been drowned, although his body had been recovered. Wasley's bullet had pierced Leach's shoulder, and a doctor on board had worked a long time to stem the resulting hemorrhage.

"Take it easy, Leach," Troy said. "You've lost a lot of blood. I just want to know why you killed McCabe. He looks like me all right. But I've been thinking. With five Hoodlums messing him up, someone would have noticed it wasn't me. The fog wasn't that thick."

"We didn't," Leach said with difficulty.

"You expect me to believe you didn't attack McCabe?"

"We didn't, I swear, Troy!"

"Then why were you in such a hell of a hurry to skip the boat? If that wasn't guilt, what was it?"

"All right, we planned to rough you up. We went to your cabin to get you, see—thought we'd do it, and then leave the ship at Rio Vista. You weren't there, but we found McCabe lyin' on the bunk dead, and all beat up, and we knew right away we'd be collared for the job!"

"You will be," Troy said noncommittally. "You can put that down as certain."

Leach thought about this for a moment, then looked almost pleadingly at Troy. "We didn't kill McCabe, Troy. We was out to get you, but we wouldn't have killed you. We didn't want to touch McCabe! That's God's truth!"

"Then if it wasn't you, who was it?"

For a moment Troy thought the Hood was going to faint from the mental effort he made trying to answer the question. His reply came feebly.

"Skeantlebury—didn't like McCabe as his partner. Skeantlebury had big ideas. He wanted McCabe to sell out to him, but McCabe wouldn't do it. The whole Coast knew that."

"Skeantlebury is in San Francisco."

"Yeah, I know." The Hoodlum seemed to realize the hopelessness of his suggestion, took a deep breath and closed his eyes as if resigning himself to his doom. Troy knew it was time to go. He had a lot of work to do.

Troy found Wasley back in the saloon, deep in another game. Troy sighed. Wasley was one gambler who struck to business, who wouldn't be sidetracked, as Troy was, by compunction for worthless Hoodlums who might be blamed for a murder they didn't commit. To play the questing sheriff was costing Troy money every minute. But he couldn't have done anything else if he'd wanted to.

He drew up a chair to the table and sat down with Wasley and the others.

"Want in?" Wasley asked, around a newly lit cigar.

"I couldn't play now," Troy said.

"How's Leach? Come to yet?"

"Yeah. Wasley, I want to thank you for your help."

"Don't mention it."

"Let me buy you supper."

"I eat before I come aboard, so I can stick here with the cards all night."

"You've been here all night?"

Wasley looked up quickly at Troy and his eyes glittered. Troy knew the gambler was aware of what he was probing for. Wasley chewed his cigar momentarily and then said thoughtfully: "I'll bet Leach says he didn't do it."

"He did, at that."

"And you believe him?"

"I don't know."

Wasley smiled his bleak smile.

"Well, I can help you again, Troy. And I dont mind doing it, because I like you. Remember when we had that little set-to with Leach and his bunch on deck. That was about five o'clock. What time did McCabe get his?"

"Must have been around seven."

"Well, I met these boys just after five. Isn't that so?" The three other players, all men around middle age, and looking like solid citizens from up-country businesses, nodded and stared at Troy as if he were an unwelcome intruder.

"And if I left this table, even for a moment, until you came after me to help you a while ago, they'll tell you so."

The players continued to stare at Troy and their eyes hardened by the second. No one said anything.

"All right," Troy said, rising. "I guess you've helped me again, Wasley."

"Don't mention it, Troy." Wasley was all business, his mind on the cards, which he dealt now with expert skill.

TROY SAT AT the dining counter with Oofty, who carried bruises on his cheek, put there by Hoodlums who resented his effective use of the bat.

"You stayed in your cabin from the time I left you, until I called you for the fight?" Troy asked, finishing his apple pie. Oofty had already cleaned up on his, and was up-ending his coffee cup to absorb the last drop.

"That's right, Mister Troy."

Troy caught the waiter's eye and he came over at once.

"More coffee, sir?"

"No, thanks." Troy put his hand on Oofty's shoulder. "Is this the man who came in for ham and eggs earlier this evening?"

"Yes, sir. I did serve you, didn't I?" the waiter asked Oofty, cautiously.

"Yeh," Oofty said, looking abashed. "I guess you did."

When the waiter had left, Oofty looked down at the counter like a child who has gotten sulky from being scolded.

"Well, Mister Troy, I didn't have a thing to do in that cabin. I walked up and down, and tried hurtin' myself, but I couldn't, so pretty soon I got hungry. I always get hungry when I ain't got nothin' to do."

"Oofty, did you like Mr. McCabe?"

"Sure, sure I did. He was always nice to me. He'd let me pick up a little money around the *Bella Union,* when his partner wasn't around. Mr. Skeantlebury always kicked me out. Why do you ask, Mr. Troy?"

"Just some things I've got to know," Troy said thoughtfully.

When Troy entered Grace Noonan's cabin a short while later he sensed the change in her at

once. She put her arms around him, and kissed him, but her kiss was perfunctory, and when he experimented by trying to hold her close to him, she slipped away and sat down upon the bunk.

"I'm glad you weren't hurt in the deck fight, Jim," she said, but her tone was conventional, without warmth.

"I promised you I'd come back," he said, watching her closely.

"Yes, Jim, I know." She arose and closed the lid of her suitcase which lay across the arms of a chair. The action was tinged with apprehension.

"You got something in that suitcase you don't want me to see?" Troy asked lightly.

She turned to face him, trying to make it look casual, but her face looked drained and Troy caught a glint of fear in her eyes.

"I'd like you to go now, Jim. I'm rather—tired."

"A big girl like you?" Troy chided gently. "With such strong muscles? You can give quite a bear hug, when you're in the mood, that is."

"Please go."

"Not before I've had a look in your suitcase. It won't take me long."

For the second time that evening Troy had his hands full with a worthy opponent. The girl struggled with all her strength, which as Troy surmsied, was considerable. But when he hit her in pure self defense with the edge of his hand at the side of her neck, she sank upon the bunk and offered no further resistance.

Ransacking the case, filled with fluffy feminine things, was the work of a few seconds only, and presently Troy said: "This is a case of shooting by chance and hitting the gold."

For in his hand, which he held out to her questioningly, Troy held a single set of iron knuckles.

TROY SAT BESIDE Captain Hansen at his desk in the latter's cabin behind the pilot house, while the ship's master adjusted the wick of the oil lamp which swung in brass gimbals over his desk, and then turned to peer at the others, who sat roughly in a circle around him —Oofty Goofty, Jacob Wasley, and Grace Noonan. Outside the cabin door were stationed two burley deck hands.

"Mr. Troy asked me to bring you here, because he felt that he had some important information to give regarding the murder of Mr. McCabe on my vessel earlier this evening," the captain said. "I might add, that I am very tired of listening to Mr. Troy's demands, and if he does not clear this matter up shortly, I shall certainly bring charges against him when we reach Sacramento, for fighting out his personal feud with Hoodlums on *my* ship!"

Captain Hansen glared at Troy

and growled: "Go ahead, Mr. Troy!"

Troy rose and looked quietly at the three people in front of him. Tucked in his belt he felt the reassuring pressure of his revolver.

"Skipper Leach did not kill Josh McCabe."

Jacob Wasley looked at Troy slantwise, as much as to say he thought his fellow gambler was crazy. Grace's hard mouth tightened and there was hate in her eyes. Oofty, present without his bat for once, looked lost and uncomprehending.

"But Skipper Leach gave me the reason why I think McCabe was killed. Skeantlebury wanted McCabe's half of the business, and McCabe wouldn't sell. So Skeantlebury planned to kill McCabe. He waited until he had just the chance that would divert suspicion from him. Hoodlums were after me; they boarded this boat to get me.

"Skeantlebury knew McCabe resembled me superficially. How easy it would be to get McCabe on the boat with me, apparently to protect me, and then have a killer hired by him pound his partner to a pulp. The fog is a pretty constant factor on the river this time of the year, and Skeantlebury counted on it. I would be the honest witness to say the Hoodlums had mistaken McCabe for me. Actually, that's what I thought at first.

"Until I began thinking.

"First, five Hoodlums wouldn't make the same mistake. The fog wasn't that thick. Second, I'd forgotten that McCabe was troubled in his mind, just before he was killed. It wasn't just sea sickness. He'd taken me to the cabin to tell me something, and there we found Oofty, and McCabe didn't get a chance."

Oofty stirred gently at the mention of his name, and scratched his head.

"Had McCabe begun to suspect the plot against him—seen somebody aboard that he associated with Skeantlebury?" Troy went on. "Maybe. I don't think we'll ever know. But when I found from Leach that Skeantlebury had cause to kill McCabe, I suspected he might have a henchman on this boat. I went to Wasley and discovered he'd been with players all evening, accounting for every moment of his time. I investigated Oofty. He'd had the opportunity, I knew—at least, he'd left his cabin. Then I went to Miss Noonan's stateroom and found at once her attitude towards me had changed. Formerly she'd been quite friendly.

"That was a mistake," Troy said, addressing the girl directly. "It told me immediately that your earlier concern for me was an act. It indicated that our whole meeting had been planned and for a special purpose, which I'd been inclined to suspect already. Then in

Miss Noonan's suitcase, I found this—"

Troy threw the iron knuckles down upon the Captain's desk. Nobody said anything, but there was a growing tension in the cabin. Troy, feeling it, continued warily.

"Now it certainly isn't usual to find corrugated iron knuckles in a woman's suitcase. But I didn't really suspect Miss Noonan, because this wasn't a woman's job. The only way I could account for the set being there, was to assume that the murderer gave them to her for safekeeping. That meant she was an accomplice, her job being to keep me occupied while the murder was being done.

"Besides, the single set of knuckles in the suitcase was clean and new. They were the second set of a pair—they're sold in pairs, one for each hand. Doubtless the murderer used the first set on McCabe, and threw it into the river after the killing."

Troy broke off abruptly and looked at Oofty and Wasley, then at Grace Noonan.

"Do you wish to point out your boss now, Miss Noonan?"

Grace stared at him white-faced. Oofty watched her with open mouth, and Wasley frowned at Troy.

"Very well," Troy continued. "What kind of man would murder another with one set of knuckles, while he gave the other pair into someone's keeping? *The kind of man who never threw anything away unless he had to, who'd save even a pin he picked up on a seat cushion.* A man, for instance, like Jacob Wasley!"

Wasley leapt to his feet. "You call that proof, Troy? That's a day dream! I got three men down in the saloon right now who'll say I've been there all evening."

"They're in cahoots with you. I've seen at least two of them at the gaming tables at the *Bella Union*. It won't take the police long to find their connection!"

"You'll have to put me closer to McCabe than that! I didn't even know him!"

"You don't have to know a man when you're hired to kill him. You were close to him."

"Prove it!"

"Glad to." Troy took a small, neatly folded handkerchief out of his pocket and laid it down in front of the Captain.

"I found this in McCabe's hand tonight. I thought he'd grabbed it out of the suit pocket of a Hoodlum, until I'd studied these little black circles in the middle of it. Then I knew it came from your pocket, Wasley. You concealed a card in your breast pocket, in front of the handkerchief; but you sweat a lot in a hot cabin. I saw you doing it when we played our game. You sweated right through the lining of your coat, so that the design on the back of the card was transferred to the cloth!"

Troy threw a playing card face down upon the table. The pattern in black upon the back was the same as that reproduced upon the handkerchief.

"I borrowed a card from your table when I visited you in the saloon this evening. And you've probably got a lot of others just like it on you right now."

Wasley gave a cry of frustration and rage then, and pulled his gun. But Captain Hansen was even quicker than Troy. He shot from desk level, and the gambler's gun-holding hand turned bloody, and the pistol fell from his numbed fingers.

Wasley stood looking in shock at his palm that would never conceal another card.

Grace screamed and hovered frantically over Wasley's wound, while Oofty Goofty rose in patent bewilderment, and in the midst of the ensuing confusion clicked his tongue with a kind of mild disapproval.

"I'll take care of him, Mr. Troy," Captain Hansen said. "Get my men in here."

Troy stepped outside the cabin to call the two deck hands, and then he didn't want to go back in.

He descended slowly to the saloon and stood outside the double doors, breathing the fresh earthy smell that blew across the river from the bordering farm lands, and reflected. He'd lost plenty of playing time. There were still a lot of passengers in the saloon.

He might as well go in a pick up where Wasley left off.

There would be a lot less competition now.

A NEW JIM TROY NOVELET NEXT MONTH

An Unusual Mystery Story Contest

The mystery writers of tomorrow will be the teen-agers of today. The story of an idea . . . and an exciting, Mike Shayne journey.

Brett Halliday

ON LAST April 10th, the Atlanta Chapter of Theta Sigma Phi, a national professional organization for women in journalism, held their annual "Matrix Table" banquet in Atlanta, and I was honored by an invitation to be their guest speaker for the evening. This was because they had planned a special *Mystery Matrix* for 1959, honoring local mystery writers.

One reason for my acceptance of the invitation and travelling several hundred miles to attend was the intriguing promise they held out as bait: To conduct a teen-age mystery-writing contest through the high schools of Metropolitan Atlanta, offering the winner a cash prize which would be called the *Theta Sigma Phi Brett Halliday Award,* and I was asked

to select the winning manuscript and present the award at the banquet.

The idea of promoting a teen-age mystery-writing contest interested me particularly for two reasons. First: because I edited an anthology of mystery stories for teen-age readers last year, selected from the best work of the Mystery Writers of America, Inc. and published by Dodd, Mead & Co., titled BIG-TIME MYSTERIES. It was while reading stories for inclusion in this anthology that I discovered the appalling paucity of *good* mystery stories that would appeal to teen-agers. I say "appalling" because I began to wonder where the mystery readers of tomorrow are to come from if we do not interest the teen-agers of today with our printed stories?

My second reason was due to my interest in the MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE and the quality and number of submissions received each month from which we must choose our table of contents. Because our magazine publishes *only* original stories, we are dependent upon new writers coming along each year with fresh viewpoints and unhackneyed stories to tell. And because of the steadily diminishing number of markets for short mystery stories, fewer and fewer writers are attracted to this field.

So I'm glad I decided to go to Atlanta and help promote the

contest, and after that illuminating experience I am less worried about the future of mystery-writing in this country in the short-story field.

I am sure you will understand why when you read the three top entries in the following pages.

Because of the pressure of time, it was agreed that Theta Sigma Phi would screen the entries before my arrival and select the three best for me to read and from which to pick the winner. Thus, I do not know how many entries were received nor what quality the rejected stories were, but judging from these three, I know the quality must have been quite excep-

tional for young writers of high-school age.

I should disgress here, and explain that, before I left New York, the publisher of MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Leo Margulies, generously authorized me to offer $50 for First North American Magazine Rights in the winning story, and payment of his regular rates for any other stories I felt worthy of publication.

This made me feel a little better when I was forced to pick one winner out of the three stories submitted to me. Because it was an extremely difficult decision to make.

All three of the youthful finalists were present at the banquet that night, and as I stood in front of three hundred people with those three eager and hopeful faces in front of me, it was one of the toughest jobs I ever did to make my announcement and watch the eager hope fade from two of the faces.

When you read the three stories, you will understand how I felt.

First prize went to Mary Lynn Mitchell's, THE FOOTSTEPS OF MURDER, because I felt it showed the most originality in conception and treatment. Remember as you read it, that this is the work of a high school student with no previous training in fiction-writing . . . it is, so far as I know, her first effort at writing a mystery story. I feel sure it will not be her last, and that readers of MIKE SHAYNE MAGAZINE will enjoy other stories signed by Mary Lynn in the years to come.

I am glad it wasn't necessary for me to pick a second and third prize winner because I feel that THE PATSY by Jim Hallman and YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO PRAY by Grady Mullis are absolutely neck and neck.

They are quite different, and each contains its own particular values. They are not printed here as finished examples of the art of mystery-writing, but as a heartening augury that the teen-agers of today are quite capable of picking up where their tired elders leave off and carry on the best traditions of the detective fiction craft.

Mr. Margulies and I sincerely hope that the presentation of these three stories will encourage other young writers throughout the United States to try their wings and submit stories to our magazine, and we suggest that any such submissions be accompanied by brief notes giving the age of the author and stating that the stories were inspired by reading these stories.

The Footsteps Of Murder

by MARY LYNN MITCHELL

The really atmospheric kind of mystery story, filled with brooding suspense and just a touch of fantasy seems to have a strong appeal for young writers. It was a delight to see it handled so ably in this first-prize selection.

IT WAS A fairly sunny day in London, with a slight tang in the air. After a depressing, foggy weekend, Monday had dawned clear enough to promise good weather for the remainder of the morning. The people in the streets hurried to and fro, on their way to work or to market, congregating at the bus stops, walking their dogs, or taking their children to the park.

The peanut vendors, old women with flower carts, newsboys, and the proprietors of bookstalls were busy with customers who had been cooped up for several days by fog and rain. The peanuts tasted particularly good, and the flowers looked especially fresh and pretty after the dull weekend. Newspapers and books always sold well after a period of enforced indoor living.

© 1959, by Mary Lynn Mitchell

The children worshipped the blind book dealer . . . never dreaming how close his blindness had brought him to the world of childhood . . . and a river of no return.

One bookstall stood out among the tall, drab, brick buildings of the city and the uniform brown of the other stands. This particular stand was painted a bright yellow with a white top, and the magazines on display around its colorful, metal-frame facade added blues, reds and purples. All the people in the neighborhood knew the story of how the stand came to be painted and never tired of retelling it.

Everyone liked Toby, the owner of the stand, but the children worshipped him. He always had lollipops or chocolate drops to distribute and a story to widen their eyes a little while they ate. He listened with serious adult attentiveness to their problems and achievements, no matter how large or small, and was always ready with helpful advice. Many a mother was grateful to the old man for a lost youngster who had wandered alarmingly far from home and been found safe in his arms.

So it was not too surprising, perhaps, that the children had decided that Toby's stand should be painted a brighter color than the dull brown of all the other stalls. Toby had been more than pleased and had encouraged them to paint it all by themselves. The actual choice of colors concerned him not at all, provided that choice made the children happy. No, it didn't matter to him what color the stall was painted, for he could not see it anyway. Toby was blind.

But he could tell that the painting had made a most gratifying change in the atmosphere of his stall. Daily more and more people were drawn to his stand by the bright color, and on this particular Monday he was doing a booming business.

Toby ran his magazine stand with almost unbelievable efficiency. Each magazine had its own special stack, and he knew just where each stack was located. Thus, when someone called for a particular magazine, he knew exactly where to find it and could produce it quickly. He never fumbled or groped in his darkness now as he had when he'd first opened the stall.

Once in a while, some of the playful smaller boys would switch the stacks, and that, of course, caused him considerable embarrassment when he gave a customer the wrong magazine. But he soon got the stacks straight again and had a good laugh with the little fellows about it. He knew they were only teasing him, not making fun of his infirmity, and he was glad they could treat him just like one of themselves and not be self-conscious about his blindness.

He was kept busy until noon on this particular day, as usual. Then business slackened considerably because of the lunch hour, and the crowd on the streets began to

dwindle as the people disappeared into restaurants, and the doors of apartment houses on the square.

Toby was busy exploring his lunch-box with his fingers to see what appetizing edibles his landlady had filled it with. He smiled with pleasure. A roast beef sandwich with lettuce, an apple, cheese, and a thermos of tea. He laid the repast out carefully and was starting to eat when he heard footsteps approaching the bookstall.

Because of his blindness, Toby's hearing was abnormally acute. He depended on his ears a great deal, and he had made up a sort of game for himself with the individual treads of the many people who passed the stall. When business was slow, he would occupy his time by listening to the footsteps and studying them. He had discovered that no two people had footsteps exactly alike. He had also learned to recognize people by their customary treads.

He could tell his regular customers easily. He knew Mr. Block's heavy, plodding step, for instance, and he could tell from a distance when Miss Lyle was coming by her brisk, tripping pace. He knew Mr. Key by the uneven limp of his bad leg. And the children. Of course, he knew all the children. Theirs were the first footsteps he had learned to distinguish. They rang a clear bell in his mind. When the children tried to sneak up on him and take him by surprise, they were the ones who were surprised. Toby had heard them when they were half a block away and was ready for them.

There were many other footsteps he could recognize on the streets each day, though he did not know to whom they belonged. He knew when someone was tired or when that same someone felt brisk and energetic. He could tell a lot about people just by listening carefully to their comings and goings.

But the footsteps he heard now were strange. Not unfamiliar, exactly, because he was almost sure he had heard them somewhere before. But if he had, it had been such a long time ago that he had forgotten to whom they belonged. Oh, well, he must be mistaken, he told himself. Perhaps it was a potential customer. He stood up straight and waited expectantly as the steps drew nearer. They were hard steps and determined. Their pace was steady, sure, measured. They seemed to have a definite destination and an equally definite reason for reaching it by the shortest possible route.

Close to the stand, they came to a dead halt. Toby waited, listening, but no one spoke. There was silence for a moment and then the footsteps began again, keeping that firm, sure pace until finally they faded out of hearing.

Toby was puzzled and uneasy. There was no reason for it, except

that faint memory of having heard the steps somewhere before, and something in their determined sound that seemed to warrant fear. Several times during the afternoon he tried to remember whose they were, but, once the children came, he forgot. The children were in high spirits and devoured both his candy and his stories.

Soon it was time to close the bookstall and head for the one-room, cold-water flat he called home. He put his magazines away and closed the stand, picked up his cane and started up the street.

This time of evening corresponded to that morning time when everyone had been going somewhere, only now each pedestrian was hastening toward his own fireside to relate the day's adventures.

There were so many people on the street that Toby did not have to use his cane much to guide himself. He was swept along with the crowd. He was enjoying a pleasurable feeling of closeness, of companionship with the people about him when, suddenly, he heard the footsteps again. There was no mistaking their clear, distinct sound.

Where did they come from? It did not seem as if they had previously joined the crowd. It was more as if they had lagged behind and were only now catching up with it. Or as if they had come suddenly out of nowhere.

None of the other people seemed to notice them. No one remarked about them or stopped to see to whom they belonged. But in Toby's ears they drowned out all the other treads. They were so different from the others, and, somehow, so terrifying.

The footsteps continued on behind him, and Toby was glad when he neared the corner where he customarily turned to go to his flat. Usually he walked this short distance alone, for it was a dark, deserted street that led to the poorer section of town. Shuddering a little inwardly, he turned the corner. All the other people went straight on, and Toby found himself alone. But only for a moment.

Behind him, the steps started up again, slow, steady, and sure. Toby began to feel uneasy. Still, just because those footsteps rang the faint bell of memory in his mind it was senseless to be worried. Just because there was hardly ever anybody walking down this street at the same time he was, didn't mean that there never would be. But there was something about these particular footsteps—something sinister and threatening—that made his blood run cold.

Finally Toby reached the steps of his lodgings. He felt with his cane and started up. The footsteps behind him slowed. Toby stopped on the steps to listen, and when Toby stopped, the footsteps stopped, too. Toby waited for them to start again, but he heard

nothing. He turned and went on up the steps and into the house. As he was closing the door, he heard them for the last time that day, growing fainter, fading away up the street.

The same thing happened on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings. Toby was never sure when the footsteps started, but suddenly they would be there, in the crowd, clear and distinct, coming from nowhere, following him home, stopping until he was inside the door, starting again, and fading away into the darkness, never losing their sinister, measured pace.

Now it was late Thursday afternoon, amost six o'clock; and the fog had begun to settle. It was a thick, wet, soupy fog. No cars traveled the streets, and almost no people walked the sidewalks. Except for the charwomen hurrying home from their work to take care of their own houses and families and the policeman on the beat, the streets were empty. Soon the policeman's merry whistling and the tap of his shoes would be the only sounds to be heard.

Toby had put his magazines away and started home. The fog did not bother him. He could not see it but could only feel its wetness against his face as he made his way along the sidewalk with his cane.

He heard the policeman coming toward him and smiled brightly. He wondered why burly young Ned Monahan waited so long before he spoke. He did not realize that Monohan could not see him until he got so close that, had he taken two more steps, there would have been a collision in the fog.

Monahan hailed him cordially and asked how business was. Toby responded with equal heartiness and said business was fine. Then each went his separate way enwrapped in a warmer glow of goodfellowship.

After Mr. Monahan's steps had passed out of his hearing, Toby suddenly felt uneasy. There was no readily understandable, cut-to-pattern explanation for it. Or was there? The memory of the strange footsteps crept into his thoughts.

They had bothered him off and on for three nights now but it hadn't been too bad. There was always a crowd of people around, and it wasn't far from the corner to his flat. But tonight he was on the street all alone again. No other people were anywhere around, and he knew, when he could feel the wetness like this, that there wouldn't be.

Perhaps he should take another way home tonight. Sometimes, when it was warm and he wasn't tired, he walked through the park and over the river. He liked to listen to the pigeons in the park and hear the water running soft and deep in the river. It was a much longer way home, but the extra distance would be a blessing if it

enabled him to dodge those footsteps.

He turned around and headed back up the street. He was wet and beginning to get cold, but he tried not to think of that. Feeling his way with the cane, he hurried as fast as he could.

When he reached the entrance to the park, he was unusually tired. Hurrying always seemed to drain him of energy. He felt along the sides of the path in the park, seeking a bench. Finally he found one, and groped for it in the darkness. It was very wet, but he sat down anyway. He had to rest. He felt relieved at having eluded the footsteps, but could not quite shake off a growing feeling of uneasiness.

Presently he rose from the bench and started on his way again, this time at a slower pace. There were no pigeons in the park now. Everything was still and quiet. There was nothing or no one in the park but Toby.

Suddenly a feeling of terror gripped him. The footsteps again! There could be no mistake—no shutting his ears to the sound. They were in the park behind him, following him, the footsteps with the evil, steady, measured pace.

Toby halted abruptly, a chill creeping up his spine. The footsteps came on. They were still a good distance away, but there was no use pretending he could not recognize their distinct, sure sound.

Where had they come from? They had not followed him all the way. He was sure of that and equally sure he had not passed anyone. Toby began to walk faster, to increase the length of this cane-assisted stride. But the footsteps still followed, never changing their sinister rhythm. Now he was approaching the bridge. He could feel the rise in the walk as he started up. It was a high bridge, and to anyone with sight, the water below it would have looked black and threatening in the foggy night.

Toby was forced to slow down. He was out of breath; he had to rest. Perhaps if he stopped by the side of the bridge and pretended to be looking down at the water, the footsteps would pass him by. It would never do to let his pursuer know that he was frightened. He felt his way to the edge and stopped.

The footsteps came relentlessly on. Slow, sure, steady.

Toby waited, raking his mind, trying to remember where he had heard that tread before. He was trembling violently, partly from cold, but mostly from fear. And still the footsteps approached the bridge, drawing closer and closer. But there was something different about them now. They were still measured and sinister, but they seemed more sure of their destination. They seemed satisfied that they would reach it.

Yes, that was it! *Satisfied!* As if, at last, they had Toby where they wanted him. They were very loud now, very near. Finally they stopped. Toby could feel the presence of someone close to him. The night was filled with evil.

And then, suddenly, now that he heard the footsteps no longer, Toby knew where he had heard them before. The smell of the water below the bridge and the smell of the evil desire for vengeance brought the picture back.

Toby was a small child again. He'd been standing above the water and had fallen in. Now he was screaming, because he could not swim and in the depths of his blindness he did not know how terrible water could be when there was so much of it and it closed over your head and clogged your nose and lungs and chilled your bones.

He flailed his arms wildly and the older child, the boy of eleven, who had dived in to save him, was flung back against the iron bridgework. His skull had cracked like an eggshell and he had died.

Someone else had pulled Toby out, and, as he lay face down on the bridge, had manipulated his limbs until breathing had been restored. And it was then he'd heard the footsteps for the first time, pacing up and down the bridge, slow, measured, sure—beginning their relentless march through the years toward him.

Essentially they had been the same then as they were now. They were feet with a destination, a destiny to fulfill. And that destiny was vengeance. They belonged to the father of the dead boy.

Toby stood now on the bridge, frozen, his ears straining for a sound. He heard nothing but, somehow, he sensed movement behind him. An arm was raised, a hand pressed against his back. He stiffened, but the hand was hard and unrelenting. Toby toppled over the rail, head first into the river.

Toby screamed, a horrifying, terrible scream, but no one heard. As Toby went down for the last time, the footsteps faded away into the darkness, slow, steady, sure—and satisfied. And in the river the water still ran soft and deep.

YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO PRAY

The shadows can lengthen in a very terrible way . . . for an innocent man awaiting death.

by GRADY MULLIS

JOHNNY HEART sat in his prison cell with only the shadow of the bars and himself for company. Thinking was a torment, but he could not keep his mind from leaping ahead and seating him in

THIS SUSPENSEFUL CRIME STORY SHARED SECOND-PRIZE HONORS IN THE GEORGIA HIGH SCHOOL MYSTERY STORY CONTEST EMECEED BY BRETT HALLIDAY.

© 1959, by Grady Mullis

the death chamber, with a metal disk on his head, his arms strapped down tight. In another hour the cell door would open and—

They'd come and lead him into that ghastly, green-walled tomb. He'd seen that job done once or twice, but he'd never dreamed he'd be the poor fool sitting there waiting for it to happen . . .

Why? he asked himself. I must think. Must try to remember. I've got to keep my mind off what's to come.

I was sitting in the Blue Dot drinking a beer, just minding my own business and watching the people. I'd just finished an important case, and was taking it easy. After a moment or two I began watching one of the patrons more closely than the others.

He was an odd little guy. Short, meek-looking, kind of like a scared little rabbit. He kept shaking his head as though he were trying to keep a fly from lighting on his nose. He was still working at it when a big, slicked-up, heavy-set man in a gray business suit walked over to him. I was sitting so close that I couldn't help overhearing what passed between them by way of conversation.

The big guy leaned over the table and said, "You got just twenty hours to confess."

The little guy turned pale. "I—I can't do it," he protested. "I've told you that before."

The big guy merely shrugged and left the bar. For a long moment the little guy sat there quietly staring at me, a look of desperate helplessness in his eyes. Finally, with a furtive glance toward the bar he arose, crossed to where I was sitting and grabbed my sleeve.

"You're Johnny Heart, that private eye, ain't you?" he asked.

I nodded. "That's right. What's on your mind?"

He looked around nervously again, and I could see that he was about ready to pass out from fear. "Could you come to my booth in a few minutes? I-I'll buy you a beer. I got something important to discuss with you." His lips tightened, as if he feared he'd said too much and rushed back to the security of his own booth.

I picked up my beer and went to join him. We sat in silence for a moment while he eyed me nervously. Then he began talking again, so fast that I could hardly understand him. "You've got to help me. *Somebody's* got to. My life's in danger every minute." He babbled on so fast I got angry.

"Slow down a minute, buddy," I said. "All you have to do is tell me your story—in nice, clear English."

He calmed down a little, and glanced toward the bar again. "Couldn't we go to a quieter place? I mean a place where nobody could see us talking?"

"How about my place?"

He didn't say a word during the drive to my apartment. He just sat crouched next to the door, glancing fearfully out the window from time to time.

When we got to my two-room suite he was close to hysteria. I went straight to the kitchen and brought him back a drink of my choicest Bourbon. It was a wrench, but the guy really needed it, and—why pretend?—I needed the business.

"Now shoot," I said as he finished the last gulp. "If you can keep it simple, so much the better."

He moistened his lips, his eyes on the opposite wall. "It's the syndicate. You know this big clean-up deal the cops are working on? Well, me and Sonny, we talked it over, and we was going to get out, and—"

"You mean the big narcotics ring?"

He nodded. "That's right. You see, Sonny couldn't—"

I interrupted him again with a steady stare. "Are you hooked?"

"No," he lied. "I know what the stuff can do. Now will you let me go on?"

"Very well. Go on," I said.

"Me and Sonny Pinello was going to get out. We figured the cops would get the big guys soon, so we was going to them and—well, sort of *cooperate.*"

He looked at me almost pleadingly. "Listen, mister, I never wanted any part of that syndicate. I was just a kid when it all started. Really green, mister, when they led me—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know. I've heard that song before. Go on, let's have the rest of it."

"Well, the big boys got wise. Somebody let Sonny have it last night as he was going down an alley. Then this Big Louie comes to me and says 'Your number's up, little man, but you got one chance to keep yourself healthy.'

"Then he goes on to tell me how I'm supposed to take the rap for that killing, that they'd get me off with, probably, ten to twenty. He said they could think of no other way to get the cops off their necks. I mean—well, what could I say? I don't want no murder rap. But I don't want no 'treatment' either."

At this, he shuddered so violently I thought I would actually have to give him another shot of my pride and joy.

I was still staring at him when there was a loud knock at the door. It wasn't the usual hour for callers, so I quickly motioned him back into shadows. He jumped back and frantically whipped out a pistol.

I opened the door cautiously and stared out. There was no one there. I looked up and down the corridor, but it was completely empty. When I stepped back into the room he was still in the corner behind the door, shaking all over

and pointing the pistol at my chest. He was shaking so badly, I was a little hesitant about disarming him.

"Here, you'd better let me have that," I said.

He surrendered the weapon as willingly as if it had been a cobra. I started to put the rod in my pocket, but changed my mind and laid it on the table instead. The poor guy was still standing behind the door almost in a trance.

"Come on, fella," I said. "Let's go back and have ourselves a drink."

We were still in the back room when I heard the door slam. I ran back to the living room. There was nobody there, but the gun had vanished from the table.

"So now you've heard it," said my guest. "What can I do?"

"Ever thought of going to the police with problems like these?"

"Ever thought of walking a tight rope at three thousand feet?" he snapped back. He wasn't a complete dope, this guy.

"Okay, fella, I'll look into it," I said. "What's your name?" I reached for a pad.

"Robert Conch."

"Um-hm. Address?"

"Three forty-seven and a half, Fifth Street."

"Okay, you go on home. I'll contact you tomorrow, if I have anything."

THE NEXT MORNING, I figured the first step was the D. A.'s office for some information on my new client. The D. A., Lyman Healy, was a pretty good guy. I dialed the number.

"Healy's office," came the gruff answer.

"Hello, Lyman," I said. "I need a favor. How about the scoop from the files on a Robert Conch?"

"Yeah? What for?"

"That can come later. Just find it for me, will you? I'll call for it in about forty-five minutes."

I went back to the back room, changed to my last white shirt, and left for headquarters. When I got there, Lyman Healy had the mug books out and was pouring over them intently.

"What've you found?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said, hardly glancing up. He got a kick at times out of acting a bit standoffish, but this time I had the feeling he wasn't putting on an act, that I was really getting the brush-off. I knew that he wasn't studying the books for my benefit.

Suddenly he said, "Here he is." But he spoke more to himself than to me.

"Who," I asked. "Robert Conch?"

"Conch?" he said. "I don't know what you're talking about. Who the hell is Conch?"

Then I knew for sure he had no intention of helping me out.

"Well, who've you got there?" I said, looking at the picture.

"Sonny Pinello, the guy who

was killed before last night."

"What have you got on him?"

Healy gave me a glance that clearly meant dismissal, and went on mumbling to himself. "Um-hm. Convicted in Chicago for blackmail; out on parole; convicted again in fifty-six for handling heroin."

I knew I could get no more out of him. I couldn't figure what was wrong with the guy, but I had no intention of brooding over it. I had something more important to think about.

I left the building and started back to my place. I was just about to reach my floor when I met a couple of cops coming down.

"Hold it," one of them said, planting himself in front of me. "You're under arrest."

"You're crazy as hell," I said, and started to move on past him.

"Come on, Johnny, don't gimme any trouble," he said, jabbing an elbow into the small of my back. "Let's go."

He sounded as if he really meant it—so much so that I decided I'd better do exactly as he said.

As soon as we got to headquarters, I called for Healy. When he came in, I said. "What are you trying to do, Healy? Play the big hero?"

"Shut up and listen."

I didn't like the cold look he gave me, the hostility in his voice.

My own voice shook a little. "Lyman, what's the deal here? I mean, for God's sake, you've known me for—well anyway, what's going on?"

"Where were you Thursday night around eleven-thirty?"

"At my apartment."

"Any proof?"

"No," I said, with a stab at funny-ha-ha. "She was working that night."

"This isn't a bit funny, Johnny," he said, shaking his head. "Can't you possible *prove* where you were?"

"I'm afraid not. Come on now, Lyman, what's the deal?"

"When we searched the body of Pinello, we found this." He handed me an envelope. I took it, looking up questioningly the instant I saw my name on the outside.

"Go ahead, read it," he said.

On a folded sheet of paper someone had written: "Johnny Heart: You had better leave the $500 at the grill on 42nd street or I'll squeal to the D. A. about the set-up you have with the big boys and the snow." It was signed simply "Sonny."

This shook me pretty badly. I handed the note back to Healy and said, "Lyman, you know darn well it's a frame."

"That's the usual answer," Healy sighed. "If it *is* a frame, how do you explain this?" He held out a gun. It looked like the one that had disappeared from my place the night before. Conch's gun. "How do you explain your finger-

prints on the murder weapon—plus the fact that you don't even have an alibi?"

My head spun, and my stomach did a gainer and a half. That lousy little bum. That fabulous little actor. That vicious punk.

Finally, I began to explain my meeting the night before with Conch. The more I explained, the more desperate I became, the more Healy's head shook in doubt. I agreed that it did sound fantastic, but that the truth was often fantastic. Finally, I thought I saw a glimmer of hope.

"The bar!" I said. "I was in there for an hour or more. Call the *Blue Dot,* Lyman. Ask the bartender. He'll clear me. He'll tell you I was there with Conch. He knows me."

Healy picked up the phone and dialed. "Yeah, Johnny Heart," he said. He spelled the name out. Finally he hung up and just looked at me.

"See?" I said. "He told you, didn't he?"

"They've never heard of you at the *Blue Dot.*"

"Never heard of me? Why they—"

"Looks like you've had it this time, Johnny."

I didn't answer him. I had to think and think fast. I knew they would let me make one phone call. My lawyer? No. I needed someone better, someone really good.

I reached for the phone. Jack Blackmar. He was my worst rival. For years we'd been at each other's throats about one thing or another. But now I had to admit to myself he was a good man. I dialed the number.

"Jack Blackmar, private investigator," said a pleasant female voice on the other end.

"Let me speak to Jack," I said. "It's urgent."

In a second he was on the phone. I told him, briefly, but fully, the whole story. I asked him to help me if he could and also to contact my lawyer. The voice that answered me wasn't the cynical, antagonistic Jack Blackmar I'd known for years.

"Sure, Johnny, I get you. I'll drop everything and get right on it. Don't sweat it. I'm sure we can get to the bottom of this."

Then he added in an almost-Blackmar tone, "After all, what could I ever do without a sucker like you around to beat out of business."

Well, Jack did get on it. But what *could* he do? He was sharp, okay. But he wasn't a magician. I had no alibi. My fingerprints were on the pistol. Even the motive had been tailored to fit. They'd left out nothing.

The time came. The courtroom was only half-filled—mostly with lawyers and cops. Pete Johns, my lawyer, really did his best. He and Jack had been working together constantly, driving themselves night and day. But his best wasn't

good enough. Even the smartest lawyer can't get a ten-way guilty man off, and the Syndicate had planned this perfectly.

The death sentence—I can't think any more. I can't think about that. I've got to think about *now,* about the time that's slipping away, faster and faster. What's a man supposed to do these last few hours? What in God's name is he supposed to *do?*

JOHNNY HEART heard the footsteps approaching his cell. "No, no," he said to himself. "It couldn't be time. I haven't prayed. I've still got a few minutes."

The footsteps grew louder and he suddenly realized that they were running steps.

"Johnny, Johnny, we've done it! You've been cleared. You're okay. We've got this thing beat. We've got a confession from the real killer."

By this time Jack Blackmar was swinging open the door of the cell.

His eyes brimmed as he grasped the hand of the stunned prisoner.

"Let me tell you. Remember this Conch character? Well, he was really half on the level. He did want to get out. The big guys promised him they'd stop threatening him if he would pull this job. He actually did kill Pinello. And he was the key man in the elaborate plan to frame you. Poor guy, all he wanted was his freedom.

"But they double-crossed him, shot him dead the first chance they had to do it without risk to themselves after his big job. Conch lived long enough in the hospital for the confession. There were two cops besides myself to witness his statement, so it's legal—"

Blackmar continued his excited, and somewhat jumbled explanation, but Johnny Heart wasn't listening. All he'd heard, really, was that he was free. The rest could wait. He gripped the bars firmly and bowed his head in prayer, knowing that he'd never cease to be grateful.

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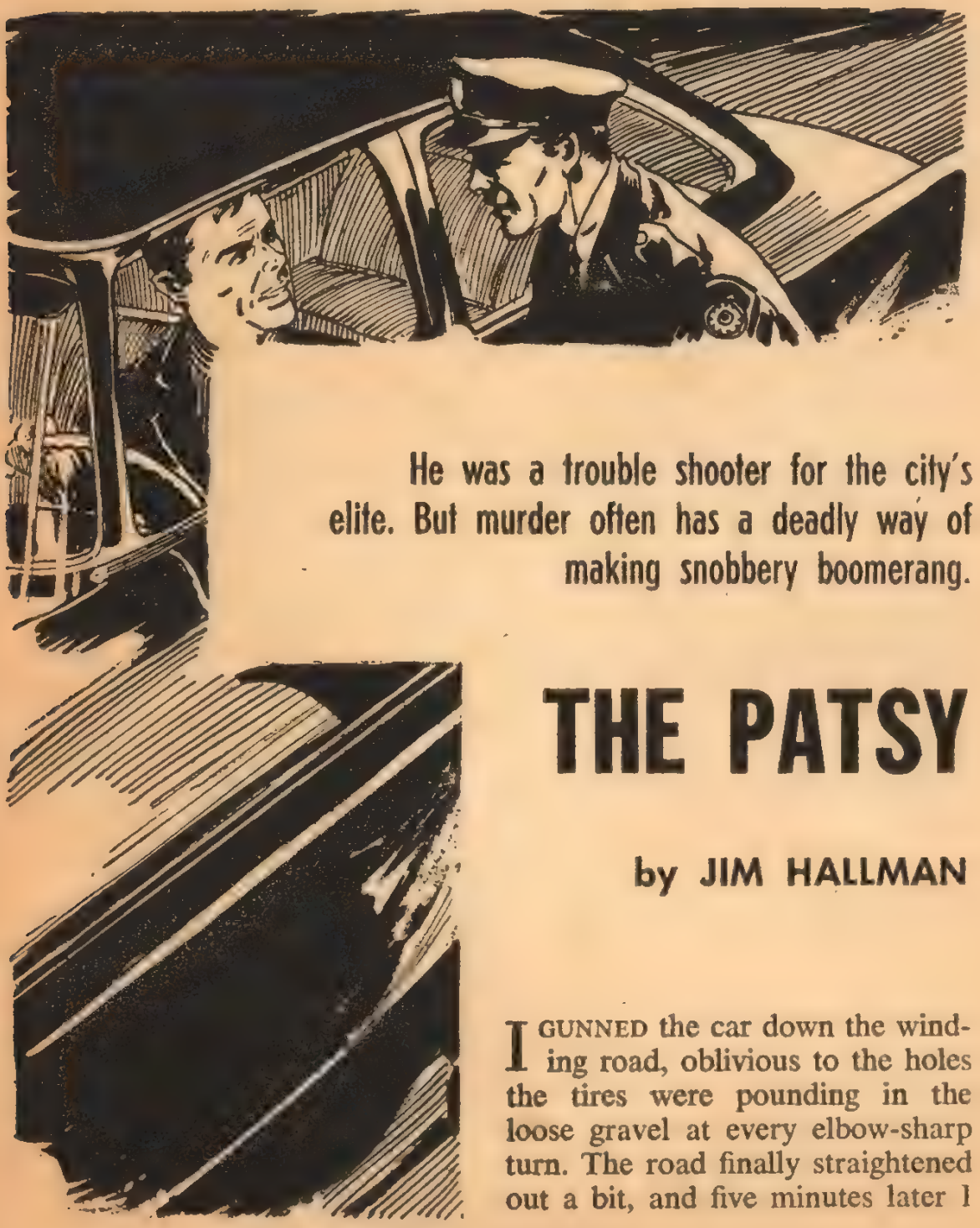

He was a trouble shooter for the city's elite. But murder often has a deadly way of making snobbery boomerang.

THE PATSY

by JIM HALLMAN

I GUNNED the car down the winding road, oblivious to the holes the tires were pounding in the loose gravel at every elbow-sharp turn. The road finally straightened out a bit, and five minutes later I

© 1959, by Jim Hallman

was at the park, the Gold Head State Park, to give it the full treatment in the fancy name department. Always crowded in the summer, the place was deserted at this time of year.

Poole hadn't arrived yet. I cut the engine and lit a cigarette, cursing myself for hurrying.

You only had to know George Poole a week to realize that he could never be on time. Even when you were late, George was later. I had known him for seven years—since our senior year at college, in fact. I had gone through on the G. I. Bill, and Poole had finally accumulated enough credits the slow way during his seven years at the university to graduate.

After college, George had gone into his father's business and inherited the entire concern five years later. He married into society, joined the Lake View Country Club, and won a two-line listing in the Social Register.

Me? You've guessed it and shouldn't have to ask. I accepted the first job offer I got, was fired two months later, and lost two succeeding jobs. Then the idea of a detective agency took root in my inquiring mind. The idea suited my temperament, and I worked hard at it. But I had no real success in building a reputation and establishing contacts, until it occurred to me to use my investigator's license to become a highly esteemed, much in demand troubleshooter for the elite of the city.

Once it became known that I could be trusted, I was well paid for discouraging an undesirable suitor of a scatter-brained heiress, keeping a Lake Shore Drive juvenile delinquent's hot-rod escapades quiet, and otherwise nipping in the bud upper-bracket scandals. Business increased to capacity and once, when I lost my license, my 'clientele' pulled strings and it was returned to me with an apology.

But this was the first time George Poole had ever contacted me professionally and I found myself wondering what he wanted.

I wasn't kept very long in suspense. I was just lighting my second cigarette when I saw the black and gold Jaquar in my rear-vision mirror, the dust cloud billowing up behind it as it sped toward me. George pulled it to a smooth-motored halt behind me, got out, walked around my car, and slid into the seat beside me.

The first thing I noticed about him that was different concerned the perpetual sneer I had always associated with his face. It was no longer in evidence. He'd changed, all right. His eyes were bloodshot, his features sallow, and his voice shaky.

"How are you, Bart?" he asked.

I didn't feel particularly buoyant right at that moment, but I saw no reason for letting him in on the secret.

"I'm doing okay," I said.

He stared at me steadily for an instant. "Yeah? Fifty grand okay?"

"What's on your mind, George?" I said, wondering what kind of trouble he was in. He and May Benedict had been married less than two years, but there had never been any hint of scandal between them. Maybe he was keeping a girl tucked away somewhere who had ideas of blackmail, but it didn't seem too likely.

"May found out about the apartment I keep at the Roosevelt Arms and she's leaving me," he said, as if reading my mind.

So it was wife—other woman trouble after all! I thought a moment before replying.

"You only married her for social prestige and you've got it now. You don't need her. I'd say you have no problem at all."

"Sure, only she wants a two million dollar cash settlement. I can't raise it without selling either the steel mills, or the mines. Dad built them up together and the sale of one now could wreck all of my holdings. May refuses to listen to reason."

"Can't you get rid of the apartment," I said. "If you cover up fast—"

"It's too late for that. May's going to divorce me on grounds of adultery. She'll go through with it, believe me, and my getting rid of the apartment now would just make the facts plainer."

"A jury might not award her that much of a cash settlement."

"On those grounds, they may. I can't chance it."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I asked. "Throw a scare into her?"

"N-no," he said. His voice was shaky again. "May won't scare. She never would."

"That leaves . . ." I let the words hang and for a moment he said nothing, just tightened his lips and looked away from me.

When he finally spoke, his voice was charged with emotion. "It's the only way, Bart. I've thought, man. Heaven only knows how I've thought."

"With all your thinking, I suppose you've thought of a way to do it?"

"May's been staying at a hotel and she's leaving the house Thursday, the day after tomorrow. She's packing her bags Wednesday and the chauffeur will help her pick them up Thursday afternoon. The chauffeur is old and won't give you any trouble.

"He'll pick her up about five-thirty. They should reach the house at six. The bags will be stacked in May's room and the chauffeur will carry them out. I'll hide one of the bags, and she'll probably take a few mniutes to look for it while the chauffeur loads the others. May's room is at the opposite end of the house from the front drive entrance and you'll have at least five minutes to do the

job while he's loading the car. You'll let yourself in the kitchen and wait for them there. Meet me here when you're through, and you'll get your money. Any questions?"

"No. You be here at three-thirty, Thursday with the money in small bills. When I see it, I'll leave for town. When I get back, you'll still be here with it or you'll burn with me. You'll stay here in the meantime, understand?"

"Sure, sure, Bart. Anything you say."

I could tell he was glad it was over. He got out hurriedly, as if afraid of being found here. "See you Thursday," he said over his shoulder as he walked to his car.

He got in and drove off, really gunning the motor. I smoked a couple of cigarettes to let him get a start, and then headed for town, turning the plan over in my mind. George had thought it out pretty well, but not well enough. Suddenly, I began to laugh. Amateurish and shaky as it was, he couldn't have picked a better plan—for me.

Wednesday went by without any annoying client headaches, and though the time passed somewhat slower on Thursday, three o'clock came around without incident. It was time to leave.

I took my brown spring overcoat out of the closet and looked at it. It was an old coat, but it would do. First, I ripped the labels and the size-tag out and flushed both down the bathroom drain. Hanging the coat on a chair, I took a razor blade and made a five-inch slit in the seam which ran down from the shoulders in back. Ripping one side-hem open slightly, I pulled some of the white inner-facing out.

It made a conspicuous white patch on the dark coat. I put on the coat, stuffed gloves and a short length of silk cord into the spacious right pocket, and left the office. George had made no attempt to contact me since our meeting and that suited me fine. Establishing a connection just before the murder would have been the height of stupidity.

I took the park road slowly this time, in order not to raise any dust. George was waiting for me at the wheel of the Jaguar when I got there. His face was very pale, his lips set in tight lines. I parked beside him, got out, and walked around to the front door of the car.

"You got it?" I asked.

He nodded, leaned backwards and pulled a travel bag out of the rear seat. He opened it, revealing small, neat packages of fives, tens, and twenties—fifty thousand dollars in all.

I saw that his hand was shaking, and grinned. He was making it easy for me—very easy.

"Quit worrying," I said. "This won't be my first time, and you've probably noticed that I'm still

around. Get out. I'll use the Jaguar. People might notice a strange car parked near your home, and with barely five minutes to complete the job, I'll have to move fast. In your car, I can pull into the rear driveway without setting alarm bells ringing in the brain of some busybody."

"Yeah, Bart, you're right. I should have thought of that myself. Here's the house key."

He got out, taking the travel bag, and climbed into my car. I swung the Jaguar around and headed it back to town.

As I neared the Poole mansion, I looked at my watch. Four-ten. I pulled deftly into the drive and eased down the driveway to the back of the house. After swinging the car around, I left the keys in the switch, and crossed quickly to the house. I let myself in with the key George had given me and looked the place over.

The kitchen was undoubtedly the best place to wait, as George had stressed. It was just down the hall from May's room—the one with the packed bags in it. I smiled when I looked in the closet. George had really used his head. It was a natural hiding place for a suitcase. It would take May about two minutes to find it. I went into the kitchen and settled back to wait.

They pulled in at six, using the circular driveway at the front of the house. Coming in from the front, they didn't have to pass the kitchen to get to the bedroom. It took them about ten minutes to load the car. Then I heard May complaining that she couldn't find one of the suitcases that should have been in her room. She told the chauffeur to go ahead and start the car, while she took another quick look around. That quick look would cost her her life, but of course she had no way of knowing that.

The front door slammed as the chauffeur went out. I put on the gloves and looped the ends of the silk cord around my hands. She was still bustling around as I eased down the hall and waited outside the door. She lingered a few seconds more, and then I could tell by her quick, decisive steps she was coming out.

I flattened myself against the wall. She came out and turned down the hall without even glancing in my direction. I let her take another step and then reached out and encircled her neck with the cord. I pulled it tight. Just as she began to go limp, I loosened the silk long enough for her to take one scream, and then wrenched it tight again, breaking her neck.

I waited until the front door opened and then made my escape through the back door, making sure as I headed for the car that the chauffeur would get a good look at the overcoat with the tear in it. I gunned the motor and sped down the driveway as he ran up.

turning my face away. I pulled out onto the street, and saw with satisfaction that he was hurrying back to the house.

I hoped he'd have sense enough to call the police before calling an ambulance. I knew he'd recognize the distinctive, small Jaguar.

After I came onto the straightway, I held the wheel with my knees and thrust the gloves and cord into a pocket of the overcoat. Then I stripped the overcoat off and pushed it under the car seat as far as it would go. I finished just as I saw George and my car. When I was still fifty yards off, I cut the engine, left the car in gear, an rolled the rest of the way. I knew that the long glide would flood the engine, and it would take a few minutes to get it started again.

George failed to notice this, however. He was trembling with excitement, hardly able to control himself.

"How did it go?" he stammered.

"Perfect. Is the money in the car?"

"Yes, and you've earned it, Bart. If I can ever . . ."

"Sure, sure," I said, remembering with a stab of apprehension that the police could not be far behind now. "See you in town."

I got in my car, started it up, and forced myself to drive slowly down the road. When I was out of sight of George, I speeded up a little and settled back with a sigh. I had done it! The perfect crime! George had no alibi for the time of the murder. The killer had used George's car and George would be found in it, trying to get it started.

It would look as if he'd stalled it by braking too fast. The gloves, silk cord, and overcoat with the tear in it were hidden under the seat. I could hide the money, go back to town and leave the town forever a few weeks after the trial. George was a real patsy—the kind all big-time operators dream about.

I could see the entrance to the highway just ahead.

I had just completed a full turn to the left when a State Patrol car pulled in front of me, blocking the entrance to the highway. My heart skipped a beat. To be caught now! I took a deep breath and stopped slowly. The patrolman got out and walked over.

"How are you, officer," I said, fighting to keep my voice calm. "Anything wrong?"

"Probably not, sir. We got a call from the state park. A man using the public phone said he'd been in pursuit of a killer and thief before his car stalled. He asked us to block this road. He says the man stole fifty-thousand dollars, but he has the serial numbers of the twenties."

I could see now that he had drawn his gun and hidden it behind his arm.

"Do you mind if I look in that travel bag, Sir?" he asked politely.

—Continued from Back Cover

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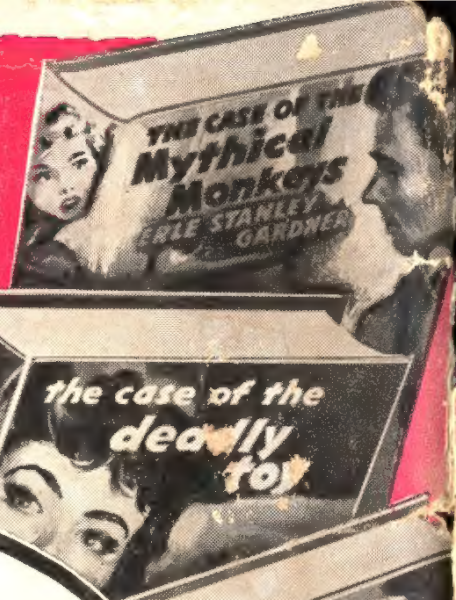

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